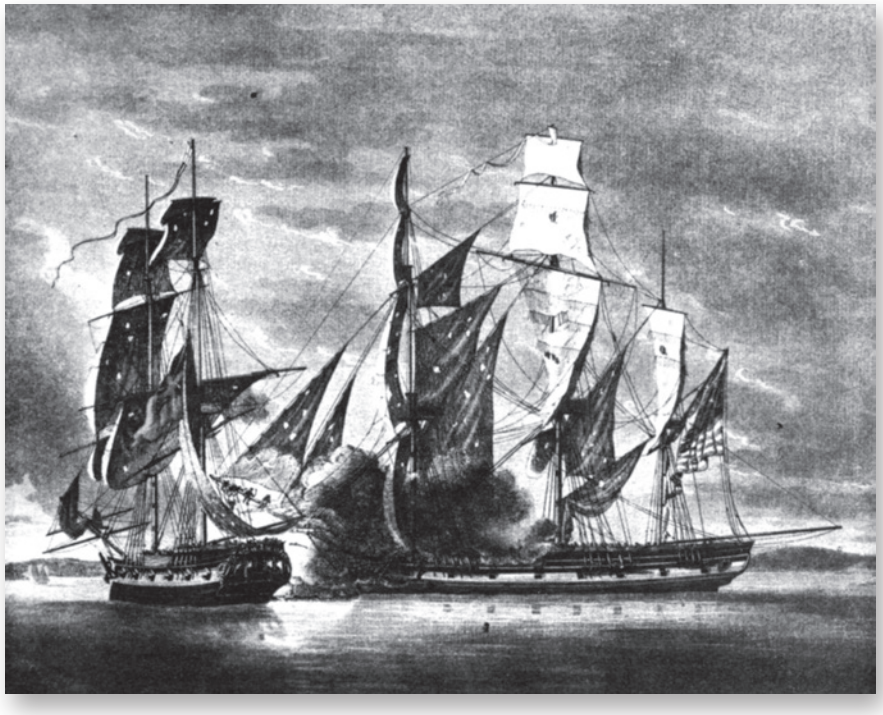
AMERICAN PRIVATEERS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

ANGUS KONSTAM

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL WRIGHT

NEW VANGUARD 279

AMERICAN PRIVATEERS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR



ANGUS KONSTAM ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL WRIGHT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4

BACKGROUND 5

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT 14
- Design and shipbuilding
- Vessel types and rigs
- The purpose-built privateer

THE BUSINESS OF PRIVATEERING 27
- Owners and captains
- Letters of marque and instructions

LIFE ON BOARD 34

PRIVATEERS IN ACTION 41

FURTHER READING 47

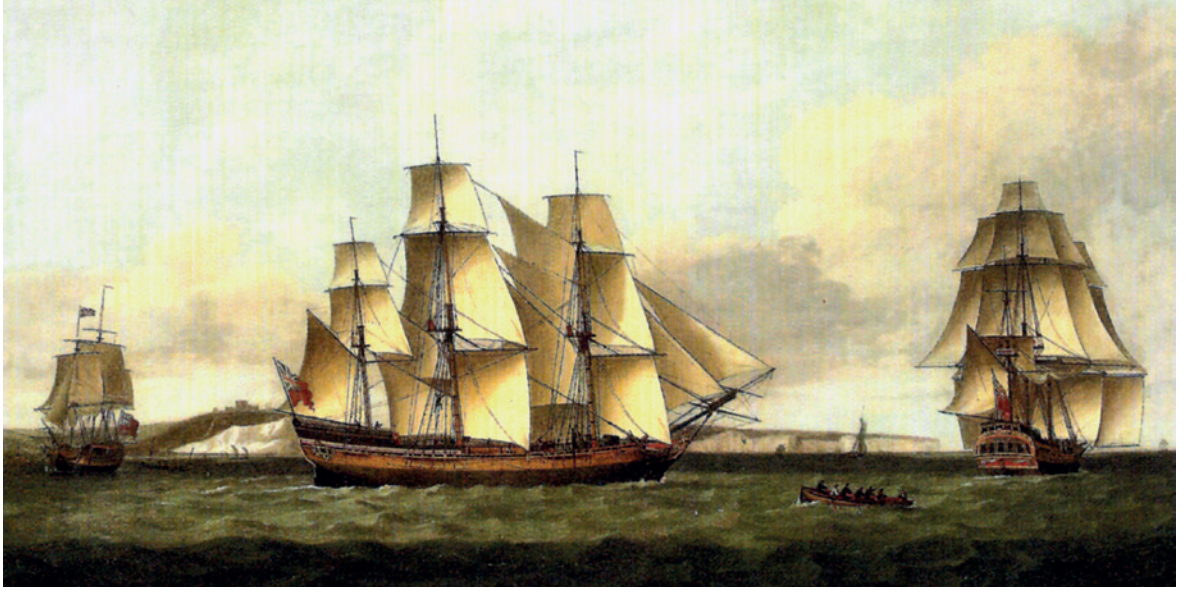
INDEX 48

AMERICAN PRIVATEERS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

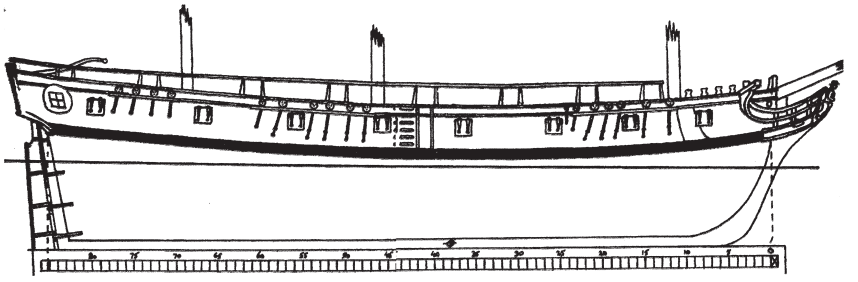
INTRODUCTION

The naval side of the American War of Independence (or American Revolution) has long played second fiddle to the fighting on land. This is understandable. With a few notable exceptions the American naval contribution to the struggle was fairly negligible, and definitely less spectacular than the terrestrial battles fought at Bunker Hill, Saratoga, Germantown, Guilford Courthouse, or Yorktown. Strategically, though, the maritime element of the war was of immense importance. The American colonies were utterly reliant on the import of weapons, powder, and other war materials in order to stay in the fight, while Britain depended on shipping to supply her armies in the Americas, and for her own prosperity. That meant both sides were strategically vulnerable, due to their dependence on ships, trade, and the maintenance of the sea lanes.

From the start, the rebellious American colonists developed a three-pronged approach to their naval campaign. First was the creation of a small Continental Navy, which in theory was there to protect American



A British merchant ship of the period, pictured at sea in the English Channel from three different angles. Unarmed merchant vessels of this kind were easy prey for American privateers, until they began sailing as part of a well-armed convoy.



The lines of the three-masted privateering ship *Rhodes* of Salem, Massachusetts. She first put to sea in July 1780, under Captain Nehemiah Buffington, taking ten prizes before her own capture by a British ship-of-the-line in February 1782.

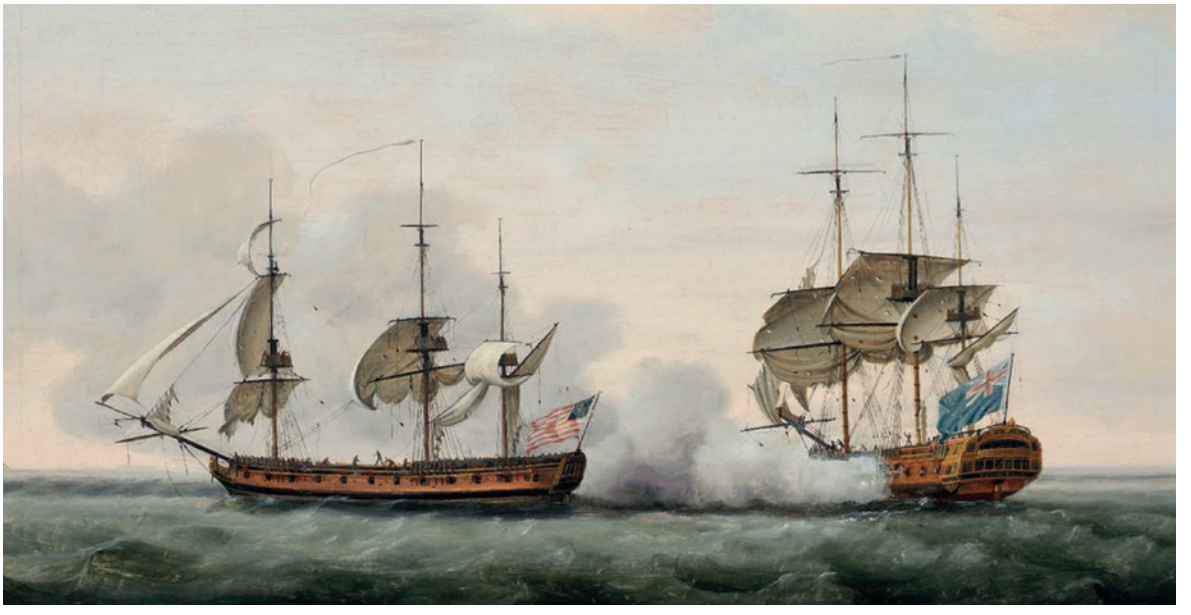
shipping, and the coastline of the rebelling colonies. Secondly, several states established their own small fleets, which functioned in a similar way. Both of these forces, though, were eventually deployed in a commerce-raiding role, as they lacked the naval strength to take on the British fleet. That strategic challenge was eventually taken up by America's allies and, from 1778 on, the French navy was particularly active in challenging British naval supremacy in American waters, from Newfoundland down to the West Indies. The third prong, however, was privateering. Both individual states and the Continental Congress issued privateering "letters of marque" to ship captains, empowering them to hunt down British merchant ships on the high seas.

In return the authorities received a cut of the substantial profits to be made from privateering, without any of the financial outlay or having to share the often-significant risks. In addition, dozens of Loyalist privateers also put to sea, and preyed on the shipping of their rebel countrymen. As the war dragged on the number of active privateers increased steadily. By its end, a new breed of large, purpose-built American privateers was more powerful than most of the warships in the fledgling American Navy. Arguably, their attacks encouraged Britain to end this damaging conflict by granting America its independence, and so ending this huge drain on the British economy. This book traces the development of these remarkable "private ships of war," and explains how they made such a significant contribution to the American cause.

BACKGROUND

> *PRIVATEER, a vessel of war, armed and equipped by particular merchants, and furnished with a military commission by the admiralty, or the officers who superintend the marine department of a country, to cruise against the enemy, and to take, sink, or burn their shipping, or otherwise annoy them as opportunity offers. These vessels are generally governed on the same plan with his majesty's ships, although they are guilty of many scandalous depredations, which are rarely practiced by the latter.*
> *Falconer's Marine Dictionary* (1780)

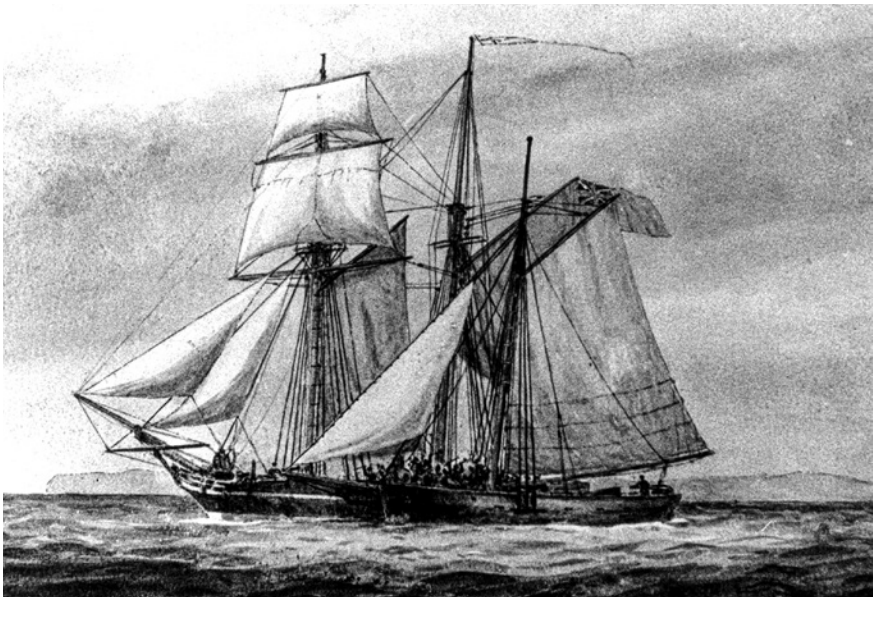
This contemporary definition of a privateer says a lot. First, it highlights the lofty ideals behind privateering. The idea was that in time of war, private ship owners holding state-issued letters of marque would send privateers to sea which would effectively act as auxiliary warships, and which would operate in a similar way to fully fledged men-of-war. The



This painting in the style of Francis Holdman shows the New Hampshire privateering ship *Hampden* being driven off by the fire of the well-armed British East Indiaman *Bridgewater*, during a clash off St Helena in March 1779. The *Hampden*, of 22 guns, carried a crew of 140 men.

final sentence, though, shows that this lofty ideal often fell short of the mark and that, by 1780, privateers had developed something of an unsavory reputation. The truth, of course, is that the ship owners who fitted out privateers during the American Revolution never saw their vessels as auxiliary warships, serving the needs of the state. Instead, while some ship owners may have held lofty patriotic motives, most, if not all of them, were in it for the money.

Perhaps a better definition of privateering was "legalized piracy," where those who held letters of marque could legally attack the shipping of an enemy power. They did so with the explicit approval of their own government, and in turn the state would take a cut of any profit made



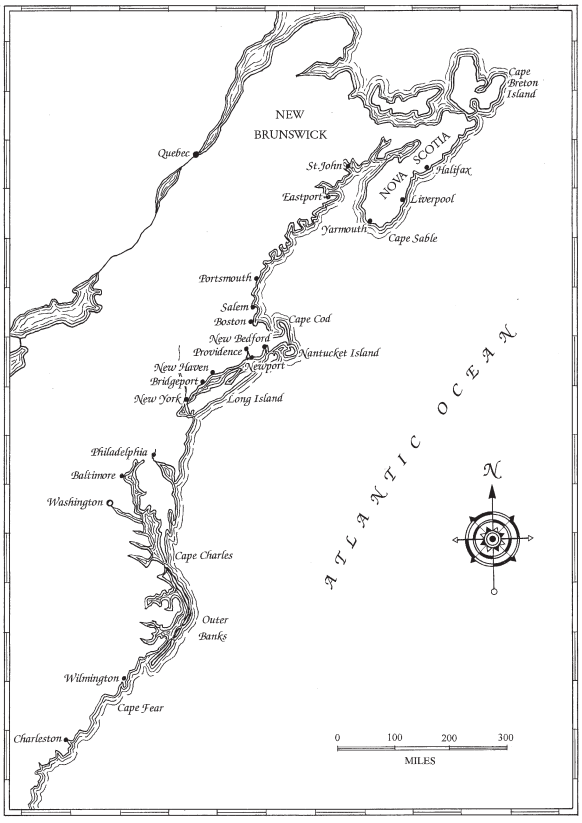
Described as the first warship of the US Navy, the Marblehead schooner *Hannah* was hired by Congress in late 1775 to prey on British shipping. This shows her successful attack on the *Unity*, an American rebel sloop which had recently been captured by the British and used as a supply vessel. Afterwards, the crew of the *Hannah* were ordered to return the *Unity* to her American owners.

This view of Boston, Massachusetts, was designed to show that by 1775 New England was producing goods worthy of export to the wider world, if the American colonies could govern themselves. This notion of self-determination was a message underlined by American privateering.

from the sale of prizes and their cargoes. So, for the state issuing these privateering licenses, this was an extremely cost-effective way of damaging the economy of a rival maritime power. This could be done without the state's navy diverting ships, men, and resources from its national navy to fulfill this end. For a large maritime power such as Great Britain or France, privateers were a useful strategic tool, but it was very much an ancillary one – little more than a means of harming the enemy financially, and forcing the enemy to deploy warships to protect its merchant fleet. For a fledgling state such as the one the American rebels wished to create, privateering would become the centerpiece of its naval strategy.

In October 1775, the Massachusetts Assembly authorized the issuing of "letters of marque." These were the licenses required to make such privateering attacks legal, or at least to have a semblance of legality. Other states followed this lead, but it was not until March 1776 that the Continental Congress began issuing its own licenses. Their hesitation stemmed in part from a debate about the nature of the naval campaign they planned to fight, and the not irrational fear that any emphasis on privateering would limit the growth of the fledgling Continental Navy. Also, it was not until that spring that Congress felt that the split with Britain had become irrevocable, and it was therefore justified in directly supporting privateering attacks on British shipping. However, this move had its advantages.

It demonstrated that both Congress and the individual states who issued letters of marque were no longer merely engaged in a rebellion against British authority. Instead, it showed that the letters of marque were being issued by a legislature which considered itself wholly independent of Britain, and which was representing its own people in international affairs. In this way, every privateering letter of marque helped to emphasize that the American colonies intended to govern themselves. This is why the founding father John Adams saw the move by Massachusetts as one of the most important legislative acts of the American Revolution. This all meant that the decision to issue privateering licenses actually predated the formal Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.



The Atlantic Seaboard of the American Colonies, showing prominent privateering ports.

When they embraced privateering, both Congress and state authorities did so with vigor, going so far as to issue pre-printed letters of marque, and establishing maritime courts to speedily deal with the legal side of prize-taking and the distribution of the profits. From a slow beginning, privateering flourished in the American colonies, as, with the approval of the authorities, ship owners, investors, landowners, the owners of shipyards and chandleries all saw a way to make a healthy profit from this. Of course, privateering was not their only option. With the rebellious colonies short of everything they could not produce themselves, many ship owners opted to pursue a more mercantile path, shipping imported goods through British patrols to sell in American ports. Many even combined privateering with trading, or the import of war materials to the rebellious colonies. In most cases then, a way was found to profit from the rebellion against Britain, as well as furthering its success.

The discord which led to the outbreak of armed rebellion in the American colonies was most strongly felt in New England. This was also the region with the greatest reliance on maritime commerce. Britain's closure of Boston Harbor in June 1774 was a response to the protest in the port known as "The Boston Tea Party." Instead, it only served to rally other colonies in support of the Massachusetts colonists. Other punitive measures

A

THE BRIG-SLOOP *TYRANNICIDE*, 1776 AND THE BERMUDA SLOOP *HOPE*, 1780

The 14-gun *Tyrannicide* (top) of the Massachusetts Colonial Navy was built in Salisbury, Massachusetts, on the banks of the Merrimack River, her construction paid for by the state. Although officially part of the state's militia navy, under Captain John Fisk she operated as a privateer, based in Salem, Massachusetts. When she was launched in July 1776 she was rigged as a schooner, but in October she was re-rigged as a three-masted brig-sloop. In March 1777 Captain Jonathan Haraden assumed command of her, and together with Fisk's new privateer *Massachusetts* she crossed the Atlantic to prey on British shipping in European waters. She returned to Massachusetts the following spring, and under new commanders she continued her privateering until June 1779, when as a warship of what was then the Massachusetts State Navy she took part in the ill-fated Penobscot Expedition. In mid-August she was burned off Bangor, Maine, to avoid capture by the British.

The small ten-gun sloop *Hope* (below) of Providence, Rhode Island was typical of the many American-built sloops which were converted into privateers during the war. She was built on the banks of the Providence River, and in October 1780 she undertook her first cruise, under the command of Captain Christopher Smith. Although not particularly successful, her real claim to fame was that her crew included a ship's surgeon, Solomon Drowne, who kept a journal describing that first cruise. He described the *Hope* as a swift-sailing vessel, although he also said she only carried seven guns, rather than the ten she had ports for – an indication that the supply of suitable ordnance remained a problem in New England throughout the conflict. It appears that the *Hope* survived the war, and was then returned to commercial use. She was a single-masted Bermudan sloop – a sloop variant first developed in Bermuda during the 17th century. Like many sloops of the period, an arched superstructure or roundhouse was built over her quarterdeck.

In this view of Boston Harbor in 1768, British troops can be seen landing, to reinforce their garrisons in New England. This reflected the growing unrest in Britain's American colonies. After the British departure in June 1776, the city became a major privateering port.

imposed by the British government fueled resentment in other ports on the American seaboard, as did half-hearted attempts by the British to capture guns and ammunition in ports such as Salem, in case they were used in any insurrection. So, in April 1775, when the first shots were fired in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, the mercantile community was eager to do what they could to support the insurrection.

Throughout the conflict, Britain never recognized the right of either the American Congress or the state legislatures to govern themselves, or to issue privateering licenses. Instead they declared that the American colonies were in open rebellion against their own legitimate government, and their licenses had no legal authority. Therefore, any privateering acts carried out against British shipping could be viewed as acts of piracy, and any captured privateersmen could be punished accordingly. In fact, while the British authorities never treated these American privateers as pirates, they reserved the legal right to do so. In theory then, a captured privateersman could pay for his actions with his life. This, of course, did little to stop a sizeable number of colonial ship owners, merchants, traders, seamen, and fishermen from carrying out attacks on British shipping, even before any official sanction could be given to them by either Congress or state.

In the summer of 1775, the British were unable to adequately protect their shipping from this unexpected threat. The Royal Navy in North American waters lacked sufficient ships to prevent more than a handful of privateers from putting to sea. While American privateers were captured in increasing numbers, British mercantile losses were significant, at least until a convoy system could be put in place, and the navy reinforced. Even then there always seemed to be insufficient warships on hand to prevent American privateers from operating. As a result, insurance rates increased, and consequently British ship owners began to exert increasing pressure on the authorities to deal with these privateers. This led to an initial surge in British naval reinforcements, and a consequent reduction

in the number of privateers able to put to sea. In fact, this largely represented the capture of older and slower American privateers, which were relatively easy to intercept.

This was followed, from late 1776 on, by the introduction of purpose-built privateers. These had the ability to range far from home, and so American privateers often cruised in European waters, or ventured even further afield. These led to a second increase in British naval numbers, as new vessels entered service, and were sent to American waters. Once more, American losses mounted, particularly as by this time both British and American Loyalist privateers were adding their weight to the Royal Naval presence. Still, privateering remained big business – the issuing of American letters of marque actually reached a peak in 1781–82, when the land war was winding down. In all, Lloyds, the British maritime insurers, calculated that a total of 3,087 British merchant vessels had been captured during the war, most of them by American privateers. However, this total was reduced to 2,208, as many of these vessels were either recaptured or ransomed and returned.

In November 1775, Captain John Manley of Boston, commanding a Marblehead schooner by the American Congress, captured the British brig *Nancy*, which was carrying a cargo of gunpowder. The British viewed this as an act of piracy, and so, later, when Manley was captured, he was treated as a privateer rather than a naval prisoner of war.

Still, these British losses need to be put into perspective. Britain had the largest mercantile marine in the world, and these losses – 300 ships in 1777 alone – were relatively insignificant when set against the sheer size of the nation's maritime economy. So, these losses could be absorbed, and despite the increase of insurance rates for ships and cargoes, and the cost of losses to individuals, the overall economic situation remained largely unchanged. Some American historians have claimed that it helped shorten the war, or bring the British to the peace table. Certainly, ship owners and investors lobbied the British government to deal with the privateering threat, but this wasn't a major influence. Rather, these attacks demonstrated a commitment by the Americans to both self-governance and the use of force to achieve their independence.

A large ship-rigged American privateer, firing on a substantial British merchantman, causing her to blow up after a spark ignited her powder magazine. This plate was used to illustrate an early 19th-century account of the exploits of a number of American privateers of the Revolutionary War era.

The two-masted *Baltick* of 65 tons (completed in 1765) was typical of the smaller schooners built in the American colonies before the revolution. Although schooners like the *Baltick* were unarmed, they could easily by adapted into eight-gun privateers.

More importantly, it helped encourage Britain's European rivals to intervene in support of the American cause.

However, the use of privateering as a tool of statehood came at a cost. A total of 216 American privateers were captured during the war, while American mercantile losses mounted to 1,108 after recaptured vessels were taken into account. While Britain was generally able to absorb its privateering losses, this toll on ships and seamen was far more keenly felt in America's seaports. This was particularly true when it came to the loss of expensive, purpose-built privateering vessels, and the prime seamen who crewed them. This said, American privateersmen made a far greater impact on the course of the war than the fledgling Continental navy did. This is understandable, as privateers far outnumbered Continental warships, or state ones for that matter. So, in most cases privateering was the best means possible for these maritime communities to strike a blow against the British.

Even more importantly for many, it also provided them with the opportunity to reap a huge financial reward from the rebellion. For privateersmen, patriotism and profit went hand in hand. This potential

B

THE PRIVATEER *RHODES* PURSUING A BRITISH MERCHANTMAN, AUGUST 1780

The purpose-built ship-rigged privateer *Rhodes* was built in Salem, Massachusetts in 1779–80 for the ship owner William Shillaber, and was completed in July 1780. With a displacement of 270 tons, a crew of 120 men, and armed with 20 6-pounder guns, she was one of the most powerful privateering ships in American waters. She was commanded by Nehemiah Buffington, an experienced Salem-based privateersman, and on her first cruise that autumn she captured eight British vessels. A second cruise the following February netted three more prizes, but on her third voyage, in August 1781, the *Rhodes* fell in with the British armed transport *Mary*, which was only captured after a running battle. On her next cruise the following February, Buffington ventured into the waters of the West Indies, but was captured there by HMS *Prothеè*, a 64-gun ship-of-the-line. Here, we see the *Rhodes* intercepting the British merchant ship *Lyon* off Charlestown (Charleston, South Carolina) on September 13, 1780. After capturing her he also pursued a British sloop, and drove her ashore.

RHODES

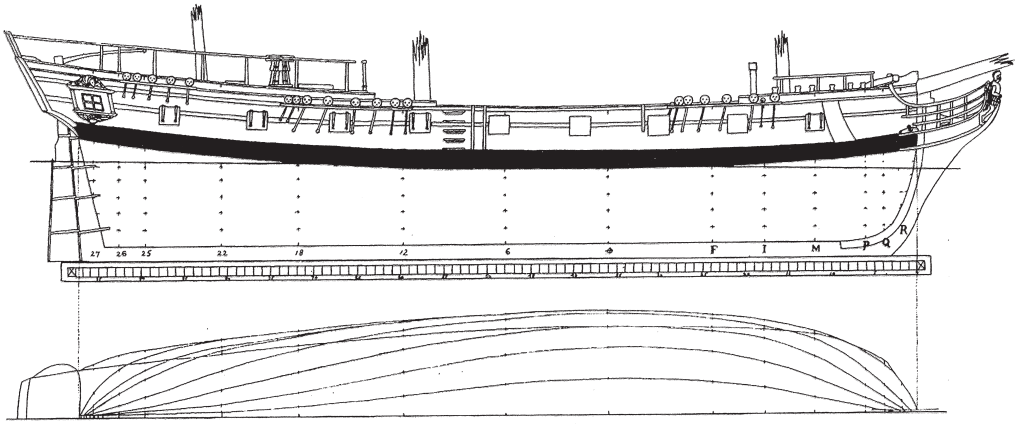
for profit, though, was balanced by significant risks. While the number of active privateers increased sharply towards the end of the war, more of them were captured too, while many of the same ship owners who owned privateers were also losing money when their own merchant vessels were captured. So, some investors lost a fortune through privateering, while others stood to make one, particularly if they had the capital to spread the risk by having shares in several vessels. As for the privateersmen themselves, those that avoided capture and imprisonment had the potential to make a great deal of money. This in turn brought much-needed revenue to the privateers' home port, and helped encourage other seamen to sign on for further privateering ventures. So, while the conflict lasted, privateering remained a popular business for all concerned, despite all of its risks.

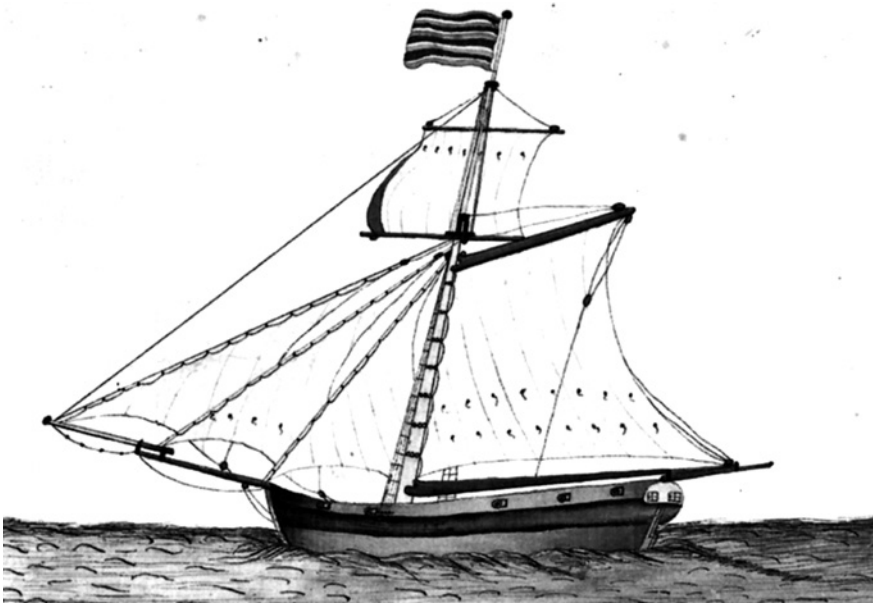
DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

When the rebellion began, there were no purpose-built privateers in American waters. Instead, the seaports of the American colonies were home to hundreds of merchant vessels of all types and sizes. These ranged from small pinnaces and whaleboats designed for short-range coastal trade or fishing, up to substantial three-masted sailing ships, built for transatlantic trade. So, in the late spring of 1775, it would be these vessels that would form the first wave of privateers. Clearly, some types of vessel were more suitable than others. A privateer needed to be fast enough to chase down a potential prize, but powerful enough to subdue her, ideally without much of a fight. If it did come to an engagement, then most privateering captains preferred to capture a prize by boarding her, as it avoided undue damage to the vessel they were attacking. So this meant a large crew of privateersmen.

After her capture, some of these seamen would also be needed to take the prize back into a friendly port. Then, if a privateer was pursued by a British warship, it needed to be fast enough to evade her pursuers, and ideally also shallow-drafted enough to enter shallow coastal waters where larger British warships were unable to go. Then there was the question of the type of prizes she went after. While small whaleboats and converted fishing boats might be able to prey on isolated and unarmed vessels in coastal waters, larger blue-water privateers would need the stores – primarily food and water – to

The three-masted privateering ship *Saucy Jack* (also known simply as the *Jack*) had a patchy career. She was commissioned in 1779 and operated from Salem until her capture the following year. She was later taken by a French frigate, which sailed her into Boston. There she was refitted as a privateer again, in late 1781, but was captured the following March after an engagement with a British naval brig.





The privateering sloop *Comet* of Philadelphia carried ten guns, and a crew of 40 men. She was commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur (Senior), the father of the American naval hero of the War of 1812. In September 1779 she was present at the capture of the transport brig *Triton*.

range far out into the Atlantic or head south into the Caribbean, where richer prizes could be found. So, during the first years of the war the most suitable American-built privateers were sloops or schooners, which had the range for extended cruises, and the capacity to embark a substantial-sized crew, as well as the weaponry needed to subdue a potential victim.

Certainly, some of the first privateering vessels used by American rebels were small-oared or oar-and-sail-powered craft, capable of attacking targets of opportunity in North America's estuaries, bays, and rivers. However, from the start, larger vessels also put to sea, having been converted to fulfill their new role. Both groups achieved a degree of success during the first months of the conflict, before the British instituted a convoy system, and sent more warships into American waters. Eventually, many of these makeshift privateers were either captured or forced to retire from the business. Also, in most cases the privateering whaleboats or coastal sloops and schooners soon found that their opponents had become too well armed to tackle without undue risk. The result was that, by the winter of 1776–77, very few of these makeshift privateers remained at sea.

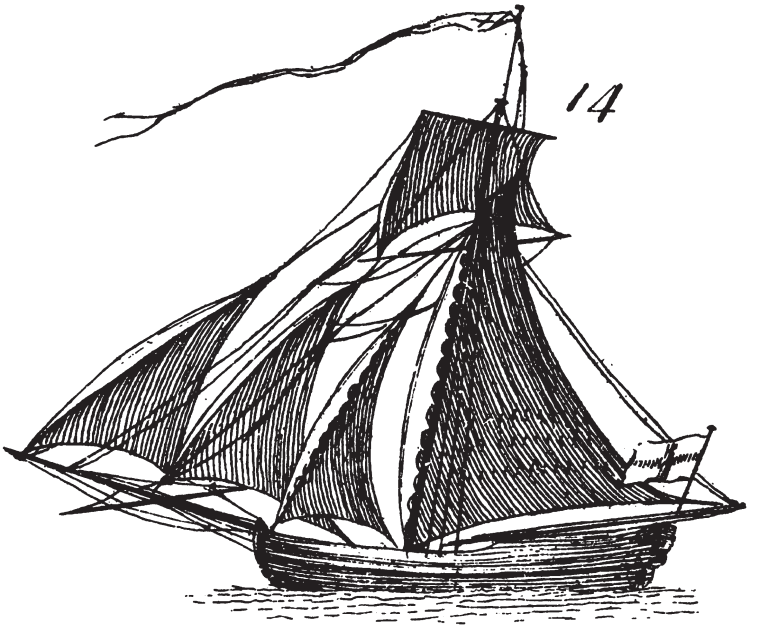
Instead, the first purpose-built privateers began to put to sea, and their number increased as the conflict drew towards a close. The general trend here was that each new batch of specially built privateers would be larger and better armed than those that came before them. What these vessels all had in common, though, was that in almost every case they were fast, as their builders had been told to emphasize speed over strength in their construction. This often meant sacrificing seaworthiness too, as in most cases the bluffer lines of traditional merchant vessels tended to make for better sea boats, capable of enduring harsher conditions while at sea. This didn't mean that smaller privateering vessels would not still have a role to play. They did, as there was usually some scope for opportunistic attacks, or even for armed American merchant vessels to play the role of privateer when they had the chance. The real money, however, lay in the new breed of purpose-built privateers, whose design was based exclusively on their role as fast-sailing and far-ranging maritime predators.

Design and shipbuilding

The majority of American privateering vessels were locally built by colonial American shipwrights. They were either built for local maritime traders and merchants or, later, were commissioned by ship owners and financial backers, and designed specifically for their role. So, at least at first, design and function were influenced by the requirements of colonial trade, and by the geography of America's Atlantic seaboard. So, in 1775 the majority of sailing vessels built in colonial America were small and relatively slow vessels, with brigantines, schooners, sloops, and snows being the most common. In addition, there were a number of larger square-rigged craft – two-masted brigantines and three-masted ships. These were little different from the craft produced in Europe, apart from being constructed using American timber and fittings. Even their guns, if they carried any, tended to be British-forged iron pieces, as these were liable to be superior to any produced in the American colonies.

In America, certain hull types and sailing rigs proved more efficient than others. In the shallow inshore waters that fringed much of the southern colonies, trading vessels had to be fairly shallow-drafted, and rigged to take full advantage of the often-fickle wind conditions. So, small sloops and schooners tended to be preferred there, particularly if they carried a fore-and-aft rig, which allowed them to sail closer to the wind than their square-sailed contemporaries. They proved better at negotiating the sandbars, shoals, and rocks that hampered safe navigation in these inshore waters. Further north, in the deeper and more accessible ports of the middle colonies or New England, most large ports could accommodate deeper-drafted vessels, such as larger sloops and brigs, or even three-masted sailing ships. For almost all of these pre-revolution trading ships, cargo-carrying capacity was more important than speed.

The exceptions were those used by illegal traders and smugglers, intent on avoiding the maritime taxes imposed by Great Britain. After the



Although most single-masted privateers of this size and sail configuration were described as sloops, this example, taken from an engraving of 1780, depicts a cutter – a variant which was favored by illegal traders and smugglers during the years preceding the American Revolution.

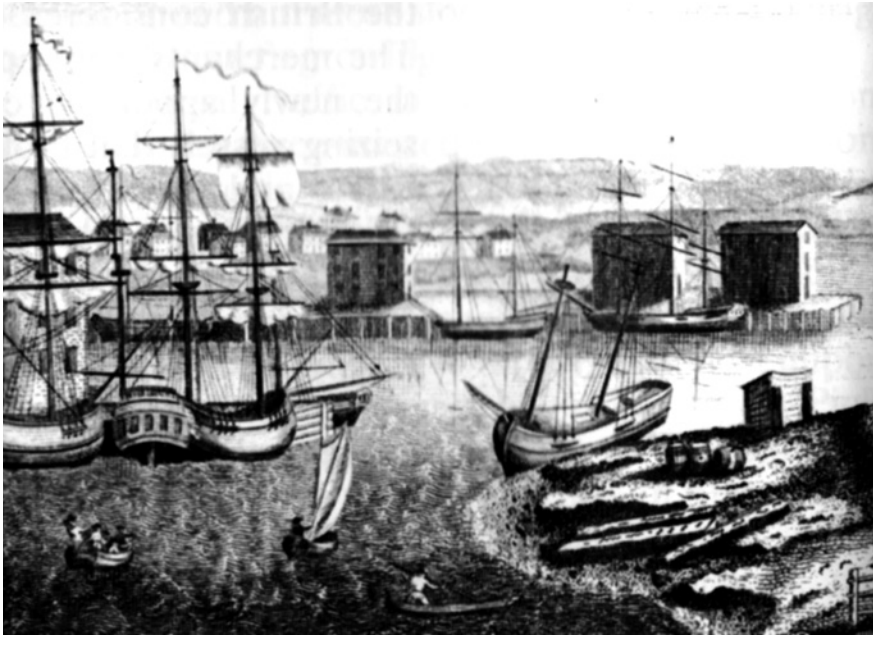
outbreak of the rebellion, this later group was ideally suited for conversion into privateers. Then there were the fast-sailing slave ships, where a speedy "middle passage" – the transatlantic leg of a voyage from Africa to the Americas – meant a healthier human cargo, and therefore greater profits. Smaller slave-carrying vessels also operated in the Caribbean, or between Caribbean ports and those on America's Atlantic seaboard. Similarly, some small trading ships were designed for speed, as they carried perishable cargoes. An example of these is the Bermuda sloop, a variant of the standard sloop layout but specifically designed for speed rather than cargo capacity. By 1775, colonial shipbuilders had developed an enviable reputation for the quality of these kinds of vessel – craft that, while small, could be speedily altered into private men-of-war.

This process was fairly straightforward. First, if the vessel was not built to carry ordnance, and guns were available, then she would be armed. This involved the strengthening of decks and the hull timbers, to cope with the guns' recoil. Next, a powder magazine would be fitted, or if one existed already then it would be enlarged. These were kept as fireproof as possible, and ideally sited below the waterline, so as to be immune to enemy fire. Additional shot rooms would be installed, and shot lockers fitted closer to the guns themselves. Of course, gunports would need to be cut if these didn't exist or, if they did, then the number of ports would be increased. If they were available then small swivel guns would be fitted to the gunwales of the upper deck, where they could serve as close-range anti-personnel weapons. Finally, gun carriages would be built, the guns mounted in them, and ring bolts and other hull or deck fittings installed, to make these pieces fully functional.

Most colonial American shipyards of this period were small enterprises that lacked sophisticated facilities. However, they had easy access to first-rate timber, and skilled workmen. This shipwright and his workmate beneath him are cutting planks from shaped logs.

The other important conversion was in providing suitable accommodation space. Privateers typically had a significantly larger crew than a mercantile vessel of the same size and type. With the crew quarters expanded, any remaining space was used to house stores, as these extra mouths required food and drink, as well as weapons. Finally, masts and standing rigging would be reinforced, to allow the vessel to be driven harder and faster through the sea than a typical merchant vessel, while new sails would also allow her captain to push the sailing qualities of the vessel to their limits. In some cases, moving the position of the masts or the style of rigging helped to push a little more speed out of the vessel. Typically, an average-sized colonial shipyard could complete this conversion process in a few weeks – usually less than one and a half months. The privateer then merely needed to be crewed and provisioned, and, armed with a letter of marque, her captain could take her to sea.

The shipyards where these craft were built were generally small operations, with the facilities to build two or three small craft at a time. Generally, they were situated at the mouths of large rivers, or in larger ports such as Salem and Boston in Massachusetts, Newport in Rhode Island, and New Haven in Connecticut. Access to good stocks of timber was a necessity, as well as access to skilled labor, from carpenters and sawyers to painters, rope and



Derby Wharf in Salem, Massachusetts, was completed in 1762 by the ship-owning Derby family, who owned or part-owned over a dozen privateers during the American Revolution. Most would have operated from this wharf, and brought their prizes here.

sail makers, and caulkers. So, while small, a colonial shipyard would be a bustling place, where all of these craftsmen would be able to bring their specialist skills to bear. In addition, timber would be shipped down rivers to the yard, and if blacksmiths were not on hand, then ironwork would also be shipped to the site. In larger colonial ports such as Boston, Philadelphia, or Charles Town (Charleston), shipyards tended to be grouped together along the same patch of waterfront.

Vessel types and rigs

A study of privateering records based on issued letters of marque tells us a little about the types of vessels which were used as privateers. Of the

Before the summer of 1776, and from late 1778 on, after the departure of the British, the port of Philadelphia was a major haven for American privateers, with almost 500 privateering vessels basing themselves in the port. This early 19th-century view of its waterfront captures something of the bustle of this American seaport.

538 privateers identified in Shomette (2016) as being registered in Pennsylvania between 1776 and 1782, approximately 30 percent are listed as brigs, 25 percent as schooners, 15 percent as ships, 15 percent as sloops, 5 percent as either boats or whaleboats, while the remaining 10 percent are either of an unrecorded vessel type, or given as cutters, galleys, or snows. These records are particularly revealing as they often list the number of guns carried, and the size of the crew. These can be compared to similar records covering 69 Loyalist privateers, known to be at sea in late February 1779. Interestingly, only a dozen are recorded as being brigantines, while roughly a third of the total are sloops, and another third schooners. The remainder are ships, except for one that is described as a snow.

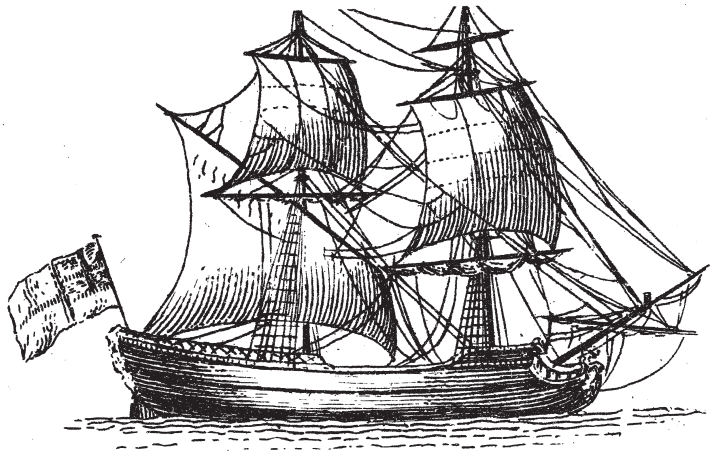
While the differences between these vessel types were immediately obvious to the 18th-century mariner, it might help to see how they were defined in the contemporary *Falconer's Maritime Dictionary* of 1780:

> ***Brig (or Brigantine)***: A merchant ship with two masts. This term is not universally confined to vessels of a particular construction, or which are masted and rigged in a method different from all others. It is variously applied by the mariners of different European nations, to a particular sort of vessel of their own marine. Amongst English seamen, this vessel is distinguished by having her mainsail set nearly in the plane of her keel; whereas the mainsails of larger ships are hung athwart, or at right angles with the ship's length, and fastened to a yard which hangs parallel to the deck: but in a brig, the foremost edge of the mainsail is fastened in different places to hoops which encircle the mainmast, and slide up and down it as the sail is hoisted or lowered. It is extended by a gaff above, and by a boom below.
>
> ***Schooner***: A small vessel with two masts, whose mainsail and foresail are suspended from gaffs reaching from the mast towards the stern; and stretched out below by the booms, whose foremost ends are hooked to an iron, which clasps the mast so as to turn therein as upon an axis, where the after ends are swung from one side of the vessel to the other.
>
> ***Ship***: A vessel furnished with three masts, each of which is composed of a lower mast, top mast and topgallant mast, with the usual machinery thereto belonging… the vessels which are usually comprehended under the general name of ship, besides those of the line of battle, are galleons, frigates, hag-boats, cats, barks, pinks, and fly-boats.
>
> ***Sloop***: A small vessel furnished with one mast, the mainsail of which is attached to a gaff above, to the mast on its foremost edge, and to a long boom below; by which it is occasionally shifted to either quarter.

Of the remainder mentioned above, a ***Snow*** was described as "being the largest of all two-masted vessels," but otherwise of similar rig to a ship, but lacking a mizzen mast behind the mainmast. A ***Cutter*** was described as a small vessel, which "is furnished with one mast, and rigged as a sloop." Actually it differed from the contemporary sloop only in its more extensive bowsprit. As for a ***Galley***, this was no purely oared vessel, as was still found in the Mediterranean during the 18th century, but instead referred to a ship which was equipped with multiple oar ports low on each beam, which allowed it to be propelled under oars when becalmed, or in light airs.

The Pennsylvania records also listed boats and whaleboats. *Falconer's Maritime Dictionary* defined a ***Boat*** as: "A small, open vessel, conducted

The problem of defining a ship based on her sailing rig was that this could be changed several times during a vessel's life. Here, a brigantine has been re-rigged as a fully square-rigged brig, but the lateen sail hoisted to her mainmast means she is now a barque. From *Falconer's Maritime Dictionary* (1780).



on the water by rowing or sailing." It then added that: "The construction, machinery, and even the names of boats are very different, according to the various purposes for which they are calculated, and the services on which they are employed." This was a fairly open description, particularly as it added that boats could be "slight or strong, sharp or flat-bottomed, open or decked… designed for swiftness or burden, for deep or shallow water."

In terms of privateering vessels, a more apt description accompanying a variant – the longboat – said it "is generally furnished with mast and sails. Those which are fitted for ships of war may be occasionally decked, armed, and equipped for cruising short distances against merchant ships of the enemy, or smugglers…" We know from naval records that many longboats could be fitted with a gun in the bow, usually mounted on a simple carriage and slide. In the Pennsylvania records, most of these boats were described as carrying one to three guns, and a crew of between ten and 40 men. For instance, the privateer *Anti-Traitor* of 1781 was a boat armed with two guns, with a crew of 40 men, under the command of John Macpherson of Philadelphia, who was also the owner of the vessel. A whaleboat was merely a stoutly built longboat, of the kind used in

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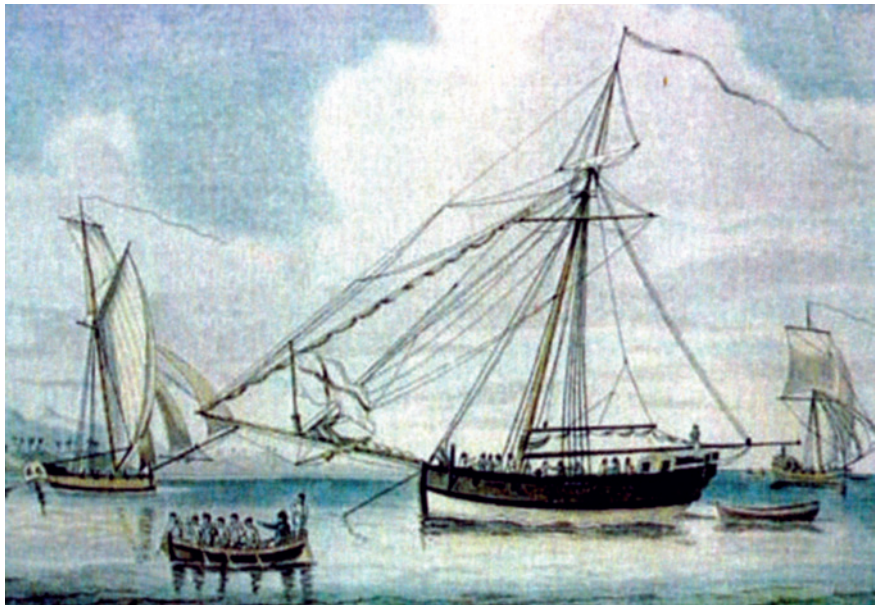
THE CORVETTE *KING GEORGE*, 1775 AND THE BRIG *FAIR AMERICAN*, 1781

Privateering was not just the preserve of the rebellious American colonists. The *King George* (top) was a corvette (or mini frigate) of 10–12 guns, which operated under a British letter of marque. She was commanded by Captain Stanton Hazard, a Loyalist from Rhode Island, who preyed on American rebel ships operating in New England waters. In August 1779 she was captured by the American privateering sloop *Revenge*, of 12 guns, and taken into New London, Connecticut. She subsequently operated as a rebel privateer, before being captured by the Royal Navy a few months later. She was duly commissioned as HMS *Allegiance*, a ship-sloop of 14 guns. In 1782 she was captured by the French, and recaptured by the British a year later. During her time as a Loyalist privateer the *King George* enjoyed a reasonably successful career, using either Halifax or New York as her home ports.

The *Fair American* (below) was a popular name for American privateers. This one was a 180-ton brigantine of 14–16 guns, purpose-built as a privateer in Philadelphia. Her first commander was Captain Stephen Decatur, the father of the officer of the same name who would become a naval hero during the War of 1812. She conducted her first cruise in April 1780, and during the next 18 months she took 45 prizes. In October 1781 she was converted back into a merchant vessel, but was captured by the British the following January. She ended the war as a British privateer.



The single-masted sloop of the period pictured here is usually classed as a Bermudan sloop, due to the sleek shape of her hull, a form originally associated with Bermuda. Due to their speed, these vessels made excellent privateers. Many Bermudan sloops also featured a curved cover to their quarterdeck.

whaling expeditions, whose robust construction proved well suited to coastal privateering in sheltered waterways.

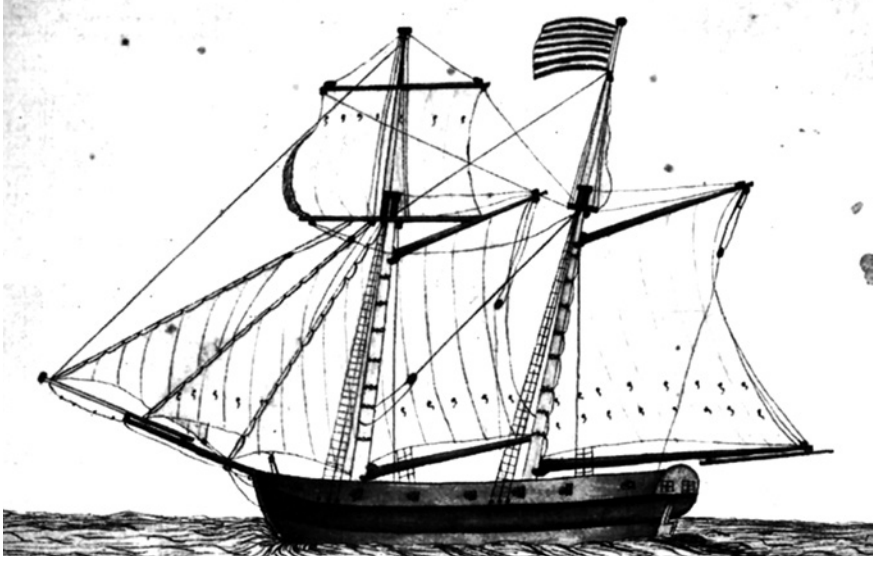
These vessels varied considerably in size. For example, a privateering brigantine could displace anything from 100 to 200 tons, and usually carried between eight and 14 guns, with a crew of 30–60 men. A typical sloop or schooner was around 60 to 80 tons, carrying 12–14 guns, and a crew of 30–40. However, both larger and smaller sloops and schooners put to sea as privateers – vessels like the Loyalist schooner *Clinton* of just 15 tons (four guns, 50 crew), or the sloop *King George* of 100 tons (14 guns, 60 crew). Ships were generally larger, displacing 200–300 tons, and these could carry anything from 12 to 20 guns, and a crew of 40–80 men. This merely emphasizes the point that these privateers were described according to contemporary conventions concerning sailing rig, with sloops and schooners generally having one mast, brigantines two, and ships three, but even here there were a few anomalies, such as two-masted schooners and sloops, and three-masted brigs. Generally, though, these terms are a fair indicator of the size and capability of a Revolutionary-era privateer.

Unfortunately, the typology of American privateers was not as straightforward as this. In the definitions above, schooners and sloops were fore-and-aft-rigged vessels, fitted with sails that ran down the centerline of the vessel, and mounted on spars – the gaff at the top and the boom at the bottom. This said, they suited certain sailing conditions, but not all of them. So, many captains liked to add square sails to their rig. For example, a sloop or a schooner might carry fore-and-aft sails, but would rig square topsails above them. Both rigs had their advantages – fore-and-aft sails allowed a vessel to sail closer to the wind than a square-sail vessel, and were better suited to navigating in confined channels. They could also be handled more easily, and with fewer crew. Square sails provided great driving force when the wind was astern or on the quarter, and so a combination of the two rigs gave a privateering captain a great deal of versatility.

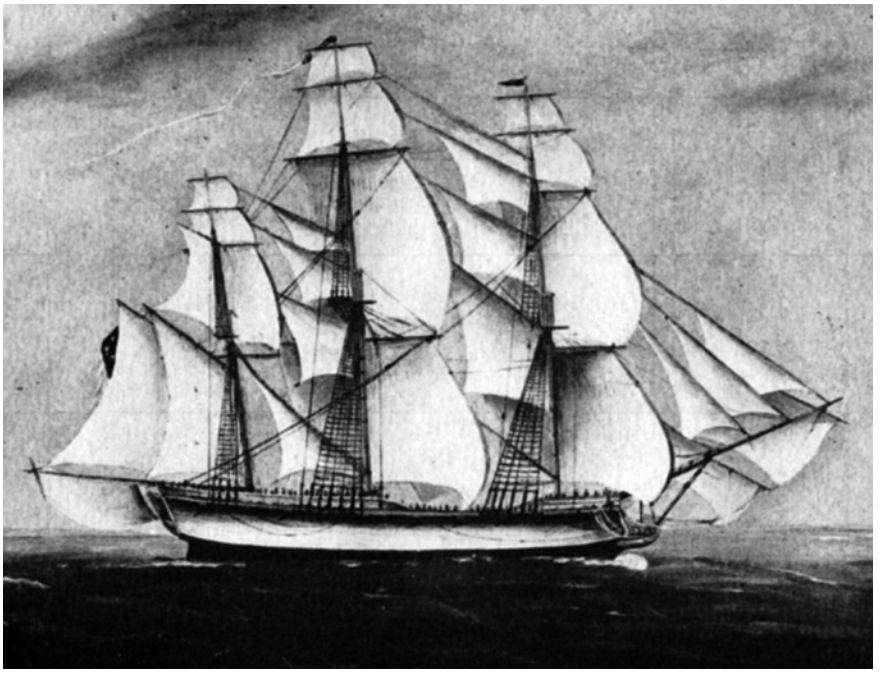
Similarly, while brigantines and ships were square-rigged vessels, with the sails mounted on spars mounted at right angles to the centerline of the ship, on some vessels the rig was altered, so that a fore-and-aft sail known as a spanker was fitted to a gaff and boom rigged on the aftermost mast. In addition, fore-and-aft staysails could be hoisted between the masts, as could additional bowsprit sails, or jibs. The brigantine, the most common privateering vessel of the period, was originally a completely square-rigged vessel, but as the definition on page 19 shows, by the time of the American Revolution this had evolved, so that while the foremast carried square sails, the mainmast supported a fore-and-aft-rigged gaff-sail, or spanker. If square sails were mounted above this, then the vessel was generally known as a **brig**, but if the mainmast was completely fore-and-aft rigged, with her upper sails rigged to the gaff, then she was generally seen as a fully-fledged **brigantine**.

Equally confusing were the names applied to various hull forms. As well as being defined by their rig, sailing vessels could be categorized by the shapes of their hulls. So, in Frederik Henrick's *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria* (1768), hulls of ocean-going merchant ships were divided into five categories, based on their hull form – the *frigate*, *hagboat*, *pink*, *cat*, and *barque*. Of these, the frigate and hagboat had a square transom or stern, although on the latter the stern was more rounded as far as the taffrail – the upper part of the ship's stern. A **pink** had a more rounded stern, while the remaining two categories sported a bluff bow, with no beakhead, the ship's head extending forward of the forecastle. However, by the later 18th century it was generally becoming more common to describe a vessel by the rig she carried, rather than the form of her hull.

This, though, explains why some purpose-built privateers of the period were described as "frigate-built" – a term that reflected their hull shape rather than any naval function, as the term *frigate* was also used to describe light, nimble, and swift-sailing naval vessels, carrying upwards of 20 guns. In fact, the term frigate-built also referred to the layout of the vessel's upper decks, with a raised quarterdeck and forecastle. By contrast, vessels with a flush-deck running the whole length of the ship were sometimes described



The privateer schooner *Mars* of Philadelphia carried 14 guns, and a crew of 51 men. In September 1779, while under the command of Captain Yelverton Taylor she captured the British transport brig *Triton*, containing 200 Hessian soldiers of the Knyphausen regiment.



Another depiction of the *Grand Turk* of Salem, Massachusetts, owned by Elias Hasket Derby. She was a three-masted, ship-rigged privateer of 300 tons, carrying 24 guns and a crew of up to 141 men. After the war she was reconfigured as an armed trading vessel.

as being galley-built, as they resembled the decks of an oared galley. Just as confusingly, a vessel could sometimes be described in reports of captured privateers as "schooner rigged," due to its sailing rig, although the same vessel, when offered for sale by a prize court, might be described as a frigate or barque. Also, in some prize accounts a schooner might be described as a brigantine, due to its use of square sails on its foremast. During this period, it seems that the nomenclature of sailing vessels was almost as variable as the sailing rigs that they carried.

The purpose-built privateer

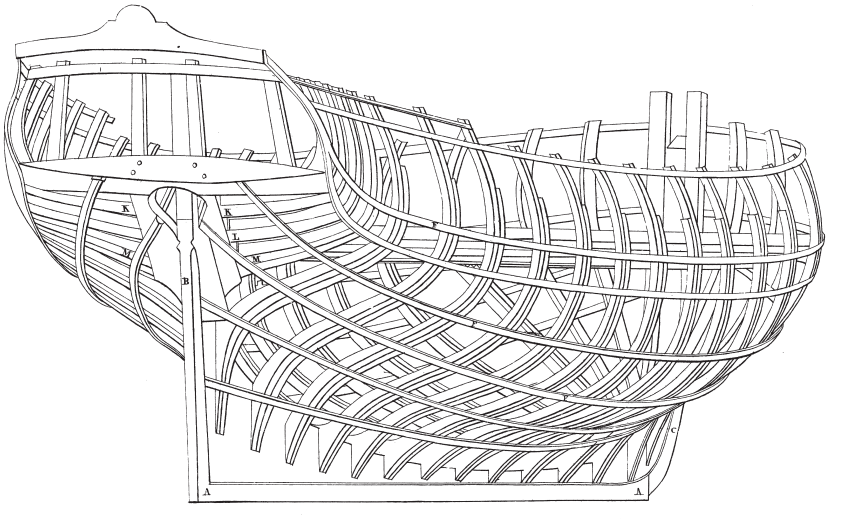
The nature of privateering changed dramatically during the war, as the financial outlay involved in building these vessels meant that the inherent monetary risks in privateering became greater. So too, though, did the potential for making money. So, for many American ship owners or financial backers, funding the building of a purpose-built privateering vessel was a significant financial gamble, but one they were willing to take. In theory, the designing of a purpose-built privateer was a difficult proposition for colonial shipwrights, as they had never built this kind of vessel before. What the leading shipwrights did have though, was experience in the building of fast-sailing trading ships. From the mid-18th century on, the schooner had been a particularly American solution to the growing need for small but fast trading vessels, capable of operating in American and Caribbean waters. So, it was inevitable that the American schooner design would be adapted for this new warlike purpose.

Similarly, while most home-built vessels were small craft, displacing less than 80 tons, a number of larger vessels were built for ocean commerce. Here, one of the main driving forces was the slave trade, whose particular requirements led to the production of specially built commodious but fast square-rigged ships in American shipyards. The slave ships of the period

tended to be either ships or large brigantines, and while at first many of these American-built slavers were converted into privateers, as the rebellion effectively suspended American access to the slave trade, the specialist design requirements of these vessels also gave American shipwrights experience in the building of large fast-sailing square riggers. In general, the design requirements of a purpose-built privateer were not dissimilar to those of the larger schooners that thrived on illegal trade in defiance of British trading restrictions, or the larger slavers built before the rebellion.

The ideal purpose-built privateer would be a sleek vessel, with a relatively narrow beam, and an overall hull length of something under 120ft. Any larger and the vessel's speed through the water would most likely decline due to her increased displacement. The vessel would have a sharp bow and a narrow stern, to give a streamlined movement of water past the hull, while she would also have a "V-shaped" bottom, with a sharper slope from the keel to the waterline than in contemporary merchant vessels. The bow itself would ideally be raked, with a pronounced forward slope, while her masts might also be raked back slightly, to improve their performance. She would have a lower freeboard than most other vessels of her size, to make boarding easier, and for the same reason she would have a low tumblehome – the inward slope of the upper hull above the waterline.

This, though, meant that her guns had to be lighter than they might otherwise be, to avoid problems with her stability. So, small, lighter guns were preferred to larger pieces. In fact, a privateer didn't usually need powerful guns, as she had no need to fight a conventional naval battle – merely to force a potential prize to surrender. This in turn meant that the decks and hull timbers did not need to be reinforced, and so the ship could be fairly lightly constructed, which in turn lessened her displacement, and so increased her potential speed. Still, a privateer did not need to be particularly strongly built. She had only to be able to carry a heavy press of sail, and a reasonably light battery of guns. So, designing the hull of the custom-built privateer was often a matter of trial and error, based on extensive experience in building fast sailing vessels in colonial shipyards. In the late 18th century the "science" of shipbuilding was based more on accumulated knowledge than mathematical calculation.

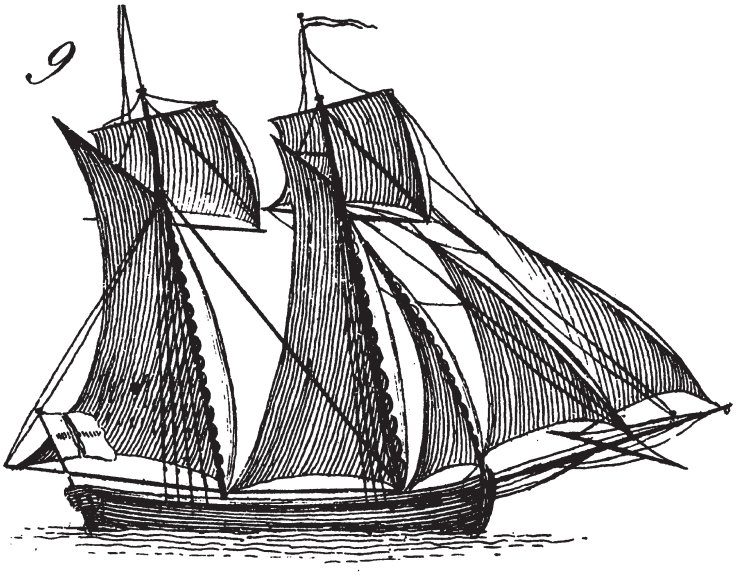


Compared to other vessels of a similar size, a purpose-built American privateer was lightly constructed, with thinner and more widely spaced frames. Her hull form was also designed to maximize her speed through the water. From *Falconer's Maritime Dictionary* (1780).

As for the way these privateers were rigged, we have already seen that this was normally a matter for the vessel's captain, and he might carry sufficient spars and spare sails and rigging to alter the rig depending on the circumstances. The narrow beam and sharply tapering hull below the waterline meant there was less stowage space than in a normal merchant ship, so provisions and ammunition had to be limited. As these ships were designed to be used by a larger crew than most other vessels, this limited their range, or forced them to plunder stores from any prizes they took. She had, though, to perform well under sail, in all weather conditions, and she had to be weatherly. A privateer needed to be speedy even in light airs, and capable of hoisting a huge press of sail if she had to engage in the lengthy chase of a potential prize. Again, the selection of a suitable sailing rig was largely a matter of experimentation, and the experience of the privateering captain.

The limited size of this book precludes the description of the hundreds of purpose-built privateers that put to sea during the war. What can be done, though, is to highlight the characteristics of a few well-documented examples. In most cases our first detailed evidence of these ships comes not from American sources but from the British, following the capture of the privateering vessel. Many large captured privateers were surveyed before they were sold or taken into service. So, we know that the three-masted ship *American Tartar* of Marblehead, Massachusetts, captured in August 1777 by HMS *Bienfesant* of 64 guns, was 115ft long on her lower deck, with a beam of 33ft and 3in. She displaced 318 tons, and carried 24 cast-iron guns, varying in size from 3-pounder to 9-pounder pieces. At the time of her capture some 500 miles west of Newfoundland she carried a crew of 130. During her ten-month career under Captain John Grimes she captured ten prizes. Incidentally, the survey recorded that her hull was painted black and yellow.

Another large privateer was the *Belisarius*, a three-masted privateering ship of 487 tons, named after the Byzantine general. She was built in Boston, Massachusetts, most probably by a Mr. Paul, and first put to sea in mid-



A two-masted schooner of 1780, from a contemporary illustration. This sail configuration originated in America, and was well suited to the sailing conditions there. Therefore, schooners were widely used as privateers during the war.

April 1781. She was armed with 20 guns (6-pounders and 9-pounders), and carried a crew of 147 men, under the command of Captain James Munro. She was captured by a British squadron in early August, at which time she was recorded as having a lower deck length of 110ft, and a beam of 30ft 6in. In *The History of American Sailing Ships* (1936), Howard I. Chapelle suggested that the *Belisarius* was similar to the *Rattlesnake*, another powerful purpose-built Massachusetts privateer, which was also captured in 1781. She, though, was designed by John Peck of Boston, and Chapelle suggests he might have designed both vessels. The British surveyors described them both as being "frigate-built" ships of 20 guns, while their dimensions were similar enough to support the theory that they were near sisters. Often, these small-armed frigates were known to contemporaries as "corvettes."

These ship-rigged privateers were among the largest American privateers to put to sea during the war. More typical were the small brigantines or schooners displacing less than 200 tons, and carrying half the guns of the *American Tartar* or the *Belisarius*. Unfortunately we only have partial records for many of these privateers, such as that of the 90-ton sloop *Phoenix* of Norwich, Connecticut, armed with 14 4-pounder guns, and carrying a crew of 76 men. The schooner *Success*, of Newburyport, Massachusetts carried just eight guns, and a crew of 41 men. She first put to sea in the summer of 1776, and while her size is unrecorded, she probably displaced around 60 tons. Still, she captured six prizes, ranging as far afield as the Spanish coast. Then there was the *Fair American*, a brig – a square-rigged version of a brigantine – of 150–180 tons, built in Philadelphia during 1779–80. She carried 16 guns and a crew of 112, and was described as being 68ft on her lower deck, with a 24ft beam. These vessels, though, were probably typical of the smaller purpose-built privateers of the conflict, and were certainly far more numerous than their larger ship-rigged counterparts.

Elias Hasket Derby (1739–99), the scion of a prominent Salem ship-owning family, invested heavily in privateering, and by the end of the Revolutionary War he owned or partly owned dozens of privateers. This is a copy of a painting by James Frothingham.

THE BUSINESS OF PRIVATEERING

The privateering vessels described here were all owned by someone – either individual ship owners or by groups of investors. Then a captain had to be found, along with a crew. Then the captain or the owners had to obtain a suitable privateering commission, as well as laying down a bond, as a guarantee that the privateer's crew would obey the instructions issued to it by the authorities who issued the license. Only then could a privateer be provisioned, armed, and put to sea in search of prey. If the cruise were successful, then the captain would bring in prizes, whose valuation and sale would be strictly organized. Only then would the investors, owners, captain, and

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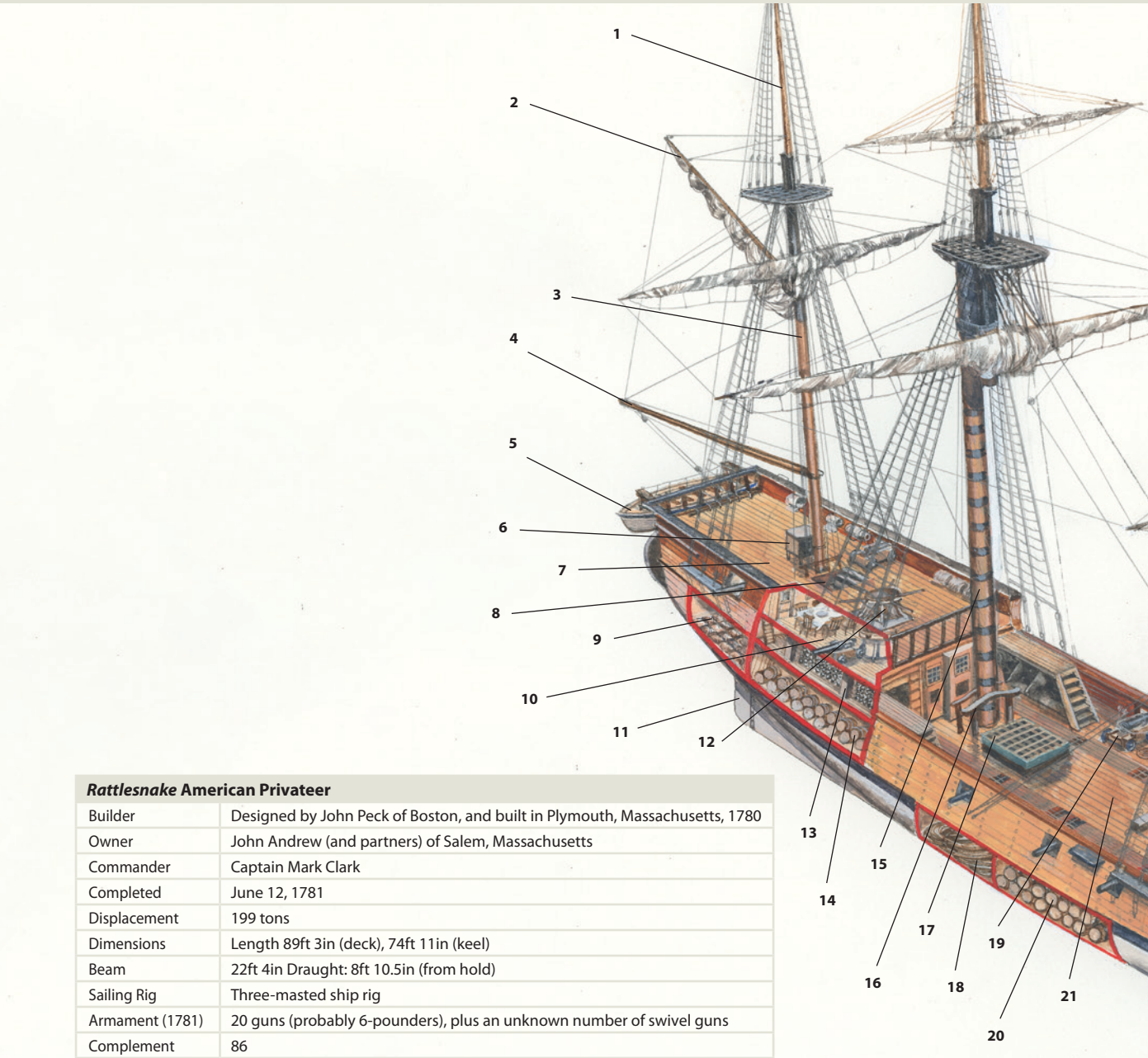
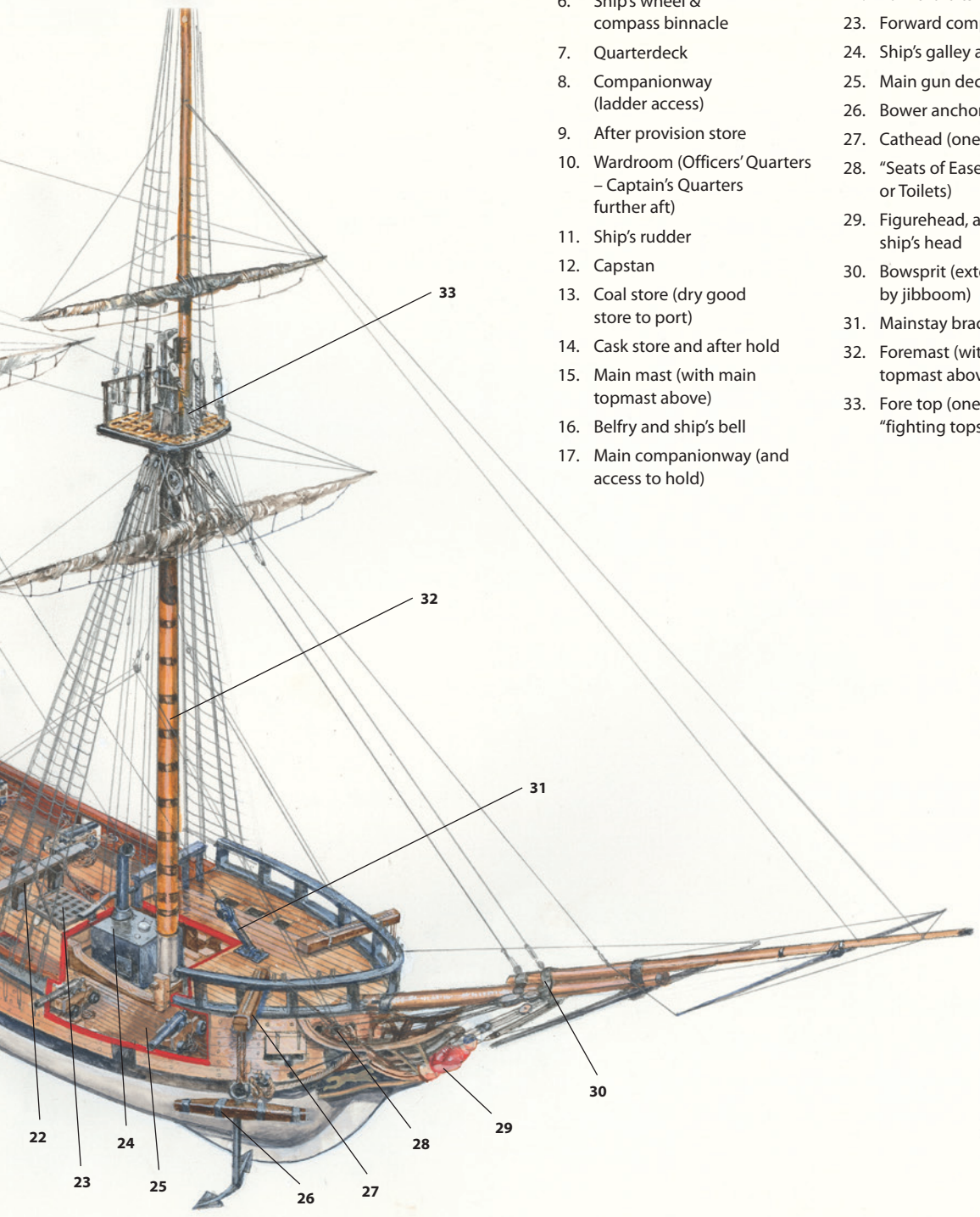
THE PRIVATEER *RATTLESNAKE*, 1781

While the first American privateers tended to be small but fast armed merchant vessels, as the rebellion progressed the need for purpose-built privateers became apparent. Privateers were privately owned vessels, and privateering was a commercial venture, so any shipbuilding initiative was driven by the needs of ship owners rather than the interests of either Congress or state legislature. The size of these specially built privateers increased steadily, until by 1780 the largest resembled small frigates. One such newly built privateer was the *Rattlesnake*, designed by renowned marine architect John Peck. The *Rattlesnake* had fast lines and was lightly framed, to enhance her speed, and for the same reason she lacked gunwales. However, she had a distinct forecastle and quarterdeck, and her hull was pierced for guns, most probably 6-pounders. Despite her suitability as a privateer she was an unsuccessful one, being captured early on her first cruise. The *Rattlesnake* was then commissioned into the Royal Navy as the brig-sloop *Cormorant* of 16 guns. She was renamed the *Rattlesnake* in 1783, three years before being sold out of service.



***Rattlesnake* American Privateer**	
Builder	Designed by John Peck of Boston, and built in Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1780
Owner	John Andrew (and partners) of Salem, Massachusetts
Commander	Captain Mark Clark
Completed	June 12, 1781
Displacement	199 tons
Dimensions	Length 89ft 3in (deck), 74ft 11in (keel)
Beam	22ft 4in Draught: 8ft 10.5in (from hold)
Sailing Rig	Three-masted ship rig
Armament (1781)	20 guns (probably 6-pounders), plus an unknown number of swivel guns
Complement	86
Fate	Captured by HMS *Assurance* (44 guns), June 25, 1781



KEY

1. Mizzen top
2. Gaff sail
3. Mizzen mast
4. Gaff boom
5. Gig and stern davits
6. Ship's wheel & compass binnacle
7. Quarterdeck
8. Companionway (ladder access)
9. After provision store
10. Wardroom (Officers' Quarters – Captain's Quarters further aft)
11. Ship's rudder
12. Capstan
13. Coal store (dry good store to port)
14. Cask store and after hold
15. Main mast (with main topmast above)
16. Belfry and ship's bell
17. Main companionway (and access to hold)
18. Rope and sail store
19. 6-pounder long gun on carriage (one of 20)
20. Main hold
21. Waist and boat deck
22. Forward bits
23. Forward companionway
24. Ship's galley and galley stove
25. Main gun deck
26. Bower anchor (one of two)
27. Cathead (one of two)
28. "Seats of Ease" (Heads or Toilets)
29. Figurehead, attached to ship's head
30. Bowsprit (extended by jibboom)
31. Mainstay brace
32. Foremast (with fore topmast above)
33. Fore top (one of three "fighting tops")

crew get their share of the profit. This convoluted process, however, was what separated these privateersmen from lawless pirates, and which allowed everyone, from the Continental Congress down to a ship's boy, to make a profit out of the venture.

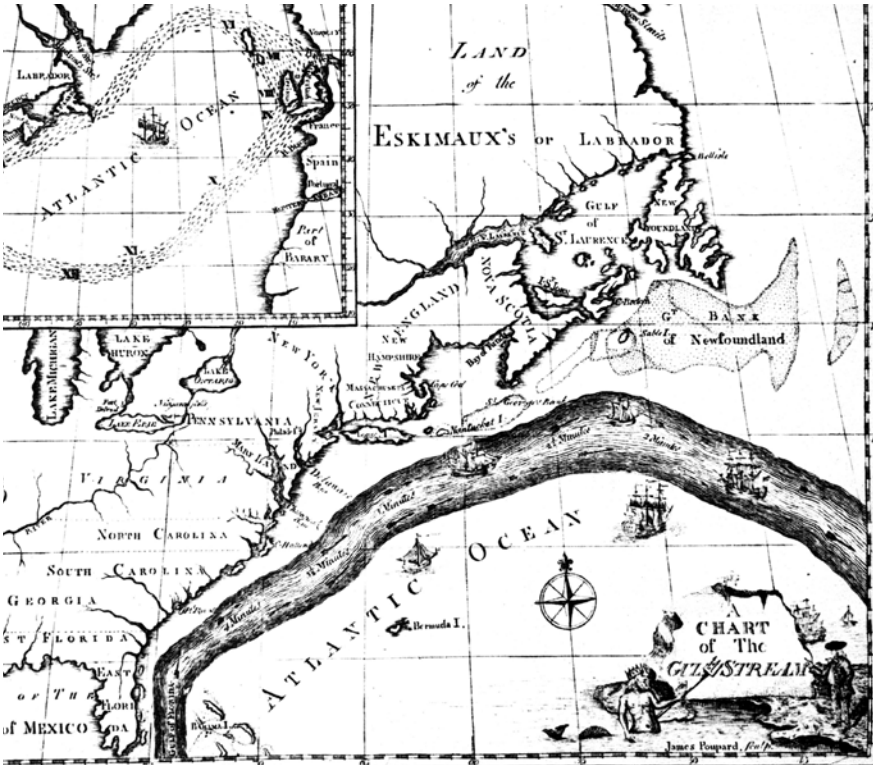
Owners and captains

While the business of privateering had a slightly dubious reputation, this did not stop a number of prominent colonial American families from investing their money in it. The reason, of course, was that the scope for profit was immense. Half the value of a prize and her cargo would go to the ship owners or their financial backers, while it could be argued that to invest in the privateering business was a patriotic act, so it combined the furthering of the national cause with the potential for personal gain. The risks, though, meant that while the captain and crew of a captured privateer would become prisoners of war, the financial hit would be felt directly by the ship owner or his backers. The authorities issuing the privateering license – the letter of marque – would stand to lose their not insignificant share of the profit, but at least they had no direct financial outlay in the venture. Neither did the taxpayer. Instead, this financial risk was shouldered solely by the ship owner and any investors he might have.

Typical of these ship owners was Elias Hasket Derby (1739–99). His father Richard had already built up a profitable shipping business in Salem, Massachusetts, trading as far afield as the West Indies and South America. In 1775 the family supported the rebellion against British authority, but it was Elias who made the leap into the privateering business, by converting some existing family vessels into privateers, and either commissioning or becoming a part-owner in several purpose-built vessels. One of these, Derby's own *Grand Turk*, launched in 1781, became the port's most successful privateer during the last years of the conflict. By the time peace was declared he was considered one of the richest men in Massachusetts, and was well placed to reap the benefits of peace, by using his ships to develop new trading links as far afield as China and the East Indies.

John Carnes (1756–96) of Salem, Massachusetts, was typical of the colonial American sea captains who commanded privateers during the Revolutionary War. In 1782 he led a raid on Tortola in the Virgin Islands, but was driven off by a British squadron.

So, once men such as Derby had built, procured, or invested in a ship, they now had to find a captain. Ideally, he would be one with a proven track record as a privateersman, with the authority to control his crew and the skills and experience to do his job. As this was a purely business venture, there was little room for preferment or favoritism. The captain they hired would be a thorough professional, and a man who was well respected in his home port. A man like Captain Joseph Pratt (1745–1833) was typical of these privateering captains. He already had a solid reputation in his home port of Salem, having served the Derby family since before the revolution. He had also commanded privateers for Derby since the previous summer. In September 1781 he was given command of Derby's custom-built privateer *Grand Turk*, and made ten cruises in her, capturing 19 prizes. His reputation and the Derby name were sufficient to raise a crew for her in just three days.



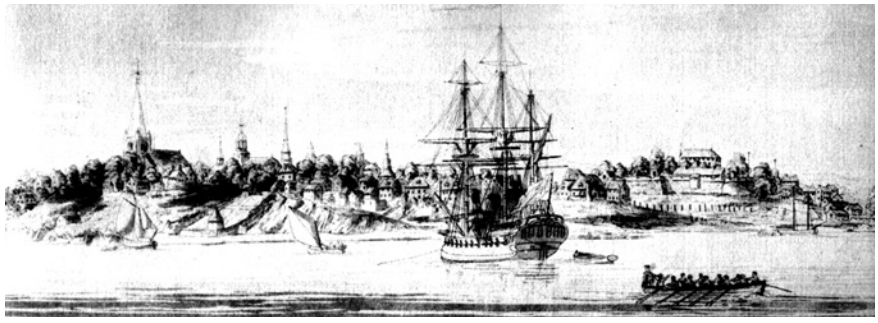
This contemporary chart of the Gulf Stream clearly illustrates how merchant ships used its flow to speed their voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. So, this made these waters from New England to the Newfoundland Banks a prime spot for American privateers to hunt for prey.

Letters of marque and instructions

Once a captain was appointed, an application had to be made for a privateering license or commission, known as a "letter of marque." Before the rebellion, these could be issued in time of war by colonial governors, by virtue of their powers as representatives of the British Admiralty. From late 1775 on, the State Assemblies of several of the colonies in revolt began to issue their own licenses, having effectively usurped these powers. Then, from April 1776, the Continental Congress began issuing privateering licenses. In many cases, a privateering captain held letters of marque issued by both Congress and the state they operated from. Still, while the British refused to recognize the validity of either body to issue such licenses, it was generally felt that those issued by Congress carried more validity abroad.

From July 1780 on, Congress became the sole issuing body of such privateering licenses. Officially, the term letter of marque applied to licenses issued to the captains of "private men-of-war," while merchant captains who wished to act as privateers were granted "letters of marque and reprisal." In fact this distinction meant little, save for a few minor differences in the way the division of the value of any prize was administered. At the same time, the owner and sometimes the captain had to post a bond, which served to guarantee that the captain and crew of the privateer would abide by the "Instructions"

The *Grand Turk* of Salem, Massachusetts, was one of the largest privateers of the war. She went on her first cruise in June 1781, and continued her privateering operations until the end of the conflict, taking a total of 25 prizes.



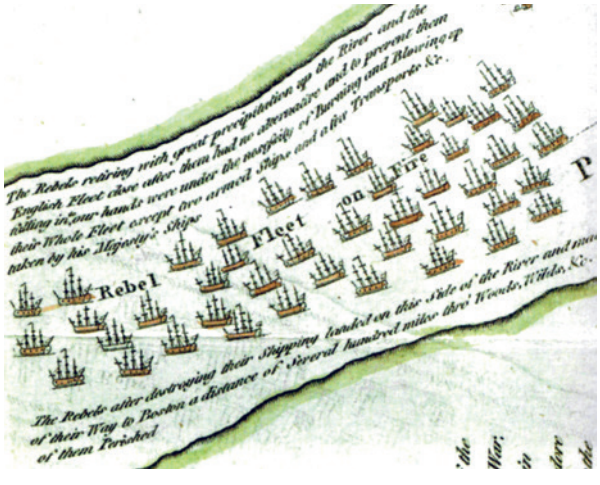
New York, viewed from seaward, shortly before the outbreak of the American Revolution. From late 1776 on, the port was home to a growing number of Loyalist privateers – over 70 of them were in operation by the end of the year.

issued by either Congress or the state – or in the case of Loyalist privateers, by the colonial governor. Failure to abide by them meant the loss of the bond. This could be a substantial amount – Congress demanded a bond of $5,000 for vessels displacing less than 100 tons, and $10,000 or more for larger privateers. So, for example, in the case of the *Grand Turk* of Salem, a bond of $20,000 was posted by Elias Hasket Derby, Joseph Pratt, and another Salem backer, Thomas Saunders.

These Instructions governed the way American privateers operated. From April 3, 1776, the following instructions were issued by Congress to all privateering captains who held valid letters of marque:

> **I.** You may, by force of arms, attack, subdue, and take all ships and other vessels belonging to the inhabitants of Great Britain on the high seas, or between high water and low water marks, except ships and vessels bringing persons who intend to settle and reside in the United Colonies, or bringing arms, ammunition, or warlike stores to said colonies, for the use of such inhabitants thereof as are friends to the American cause, which you shall suffer to pass unmolested, the commander thereof permitting a peaceable search, and giving satisfactory information of the contents of the ladings, and destinations of the voyages.
>
> **II.** You may, by force of arms, attack, subdue, and take all ships and other vessels carrying soldiers, arms, gunpowder, ammunition, provisions, and any other contraband goods, to any of the British armies or ships of war employed against these colonies.
>
> **III.** You shall bring such vessels as you shall take, with their guns, rigging, tackle, apparel, furniture, and lading, to some convenient port or ports of the United Colonies, that proceedings may thereupon be had in due form before the courts, which are, or shall be there appointed to hear and determine causes civil and maritime.

A detail of an engraving commemorating the end of the Penobscot Bay expedition of mid-1779. It ended with an American fleet of warships, privateers, and transports becoming trapped in the Penobscot River. There, the trapped ships were set on fire and scuttled to prevent them falling into British hands. At least ten privateers were lost, including the celebrated *Tyrannicide*.



So, these instructions clearly laid down just who could be attacked, and what should be done with any prizes. The administrative side of the bargain was that the captain would submit full lists of the vessels they captured, the cargo they contained, and paperwork captured, and even send the captain or other

senior officer of any prize to the court, so they could be questioned under oath. This was to make sure everything was fully above board, and to reduce the risk of fraud or embezzlement. In fact, the legality of a capture could often be muddied. For instance, a vessel might be captured and recaptured several times, or hold paperwork that suggested it was a neutral vessel, even though it was transporting goods to an enemy port. These problems would be dealt with by the courts, although it appears that in most cases, whether they were American courts in Boston, Massachusetts or British ones dealing with Loyalist claims in Halifax, Nova Scotia or Kingston, Jamaica, it was rare for a court to overturn a privateering claim on mere legal quibbles.

One of the most important paragraphs dealt with the way prisoners should be treated:

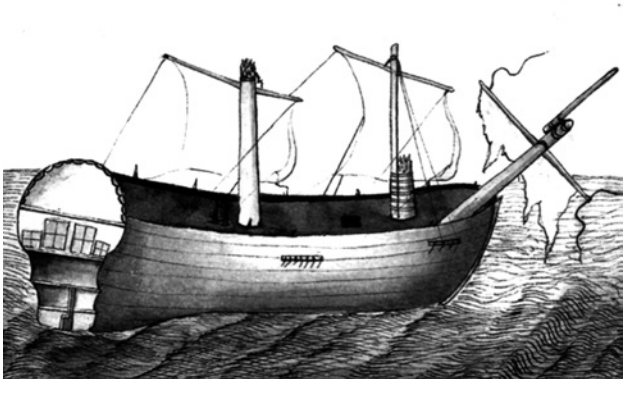
> **VI.** If you, or any of your officers or crew shall, in cold blood, kill or maim, or, by torture or otherwise, cruelly, inhumanely, and contrary to common usage and the practice of civilized nations in war, treat a person or persons surprised in the ship or vessel you shall take, the offender shall be severely punished.

Then came the financial threat:

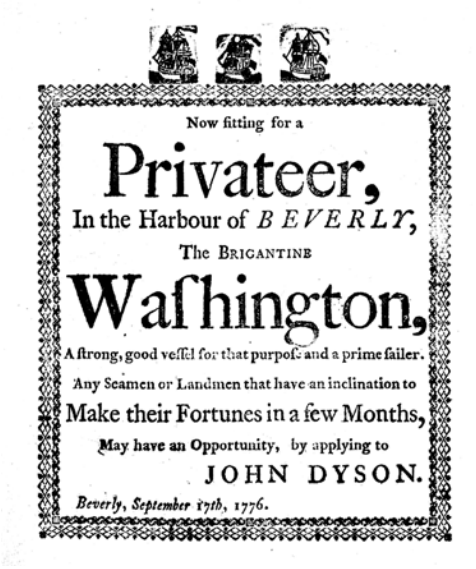
> **XI.** If you shall do any thing contrary to the Instructions, or to others hereafter to be given, or willingly suffer such things to be done, you shall not only forfeit your commission, and be liable to an action for breach of the condition of your bond, but be responsible to the party grieved for damages sustained by such malversation.

It is hardly surprising that privateering captains tended to behave themselves, keep good records, and not abuse their captives, and so avoid any risk of losing their bond money. In return for all this, the issuing authority – the Congress, the state or the colonial governor in the case of Loyalists – supported the privateers by establishing courts in which the prize claims could be dealt with fairly and speedily, and the money from the sale of the captured ships and cargo generated would then be divided up according to the terms of the share agreement approved by the authorities, the owners, and the captain and crew. Finally, once bonds had been set, licenses issued, instructions agreed to, and share apportions agreed by all parties, including the crew, a privateering captain could take his ship to sea, in search of those lucrative prizes that would make the whole administrative burden worthwhile.

During a cruise, any prizes captured would be taken into a friendly port by a prize crew from the privateer. Then, once the privateer returned to port, all the relevant paperwork would be collected by prize agents representing the authorities, and a trial date set when the legal questions would be dealt with. In foreign ports, agents representing the Congress or the ship owners would perform the same duties on behalf of the relevant authorities. At least two weeks before the trial a detailed notification of the prize, a



The British transport ship *Triton* sailed from New York in September 1779, but was dismasted in a hurricane, and so, after the storm she fell easy prey to American privateers. On board were hundreds of Hessian mercenaries, destined for service in the southern colonies.


Now fitting for a
Privateer,
In the Harbour of *BEVERLY*,
The BRIGANTINE
Washington,
A ſtrong, good veſſel for that purpoſe and a prime ſailer.
Any Seamen or Landmen that have an inclination to
Make their Fortunes in a few Months,
May have an Opportunity, by applying to
JOHN DYSON.
Beverly, September 19th, 1776.

A newspaper advert, typical of the period, calling on volunteers to crew a new privateer, in this case the *Washington* of 100 tons and 12 guns, of Beverly, Massachusetts. She first put to sea in October 1776, and took nine prizes before her capture in May 1778.

description of her, and a listing of her cargo would be posted in the newspapers. The owners of the prize were invited to attend the trial, and give reasons why the prize was taken illegally.

At the trial, held by a Court of Justice, the case of each prize would be heard by up to 12 jurors, and a decision made. If the prize was deemed to have been captured legally, then it and its cargo would be sold. Between a quarter and a third of its value would be set aside, to be divided between the captain and crew of the privateer, in accordance with their agreed system of apportioning shares. Then the authorities would take their cut – first to cover the cost of administration and of the trial and sale, plus a commission for the agents. Then the remainder would be divided up between the owners and any investors or backers they might have. It was a well-oiled system, designed to make sure that everyone got their due cut – apart from the foreign owners and insurers of the vessel and cargo, of course.

LIFE ON BOARD

When a privateer was preparing for a voyage, her owners or captain would put the word out for volunteers. One of the criticisms of privateering was that it stripped America's seaports of seamen who might otherwise sign up for the warships of the Continental Navy, or even the state navies. Their crews, like those of merchant ships, received a regular wage, while privateersmen did not. Instead they were awarded a share of any prize money. This, though, could potentially be a small fortune, and so, despite the risks, there was rarely a shortage of volunteers, at least for privateers commanded by successful and highly reputable captains. So, to recruit a crew, adverts would be placed in newspapers, and notices posted in taverns:

E

THE BRIG *WASHINGTON*, 1776 AND THE CORVETTE *MOHAWK*, 1780

The *Washington* (top) was a 95-ton 12-gun brig similar to the *Fair American,* built in Beverly, Massachusetts in 1776. She was purpose-built as a privateer, and under Captains Elias Smith and then Nicolas Ogleby she had a reasonably successful career, capturing nine British prizes between October 1776 and July 1777. After undergoing a refit in Plymouth, Massachusetts, she returned to sea in May 1778 under the command of Captain Nathaniel Warden. This time, though, her luck ran out, as on May 30 she was captured by British warships, and taken into Halifax, Nova Scotia. She was bought by Liverpool ship owners, and duly became the British privateer *Dragon*. She went on to capture five French prizes in the Caribbean, before being captured in turn by a French frigate. She was bought into French service, becoming the French corvette *Le Dragon*. In January 1783 she was blown up by her crew off the north coast of Hispaniola, to avoid capture by a British squadron.

The *Mohawk* (bottom) was another purpose-built privateer of between 200 and 250 tons, built in Beverly, Massachusetts. She carried 16–20 guns, and was completed in November 1781. Her first commander was Captain Elias Smith, and in January 1782 he took her on a cruise in West Indies waters, where he captured four prizes. By April she was back in Beverly, and in September she returned to sea, under Captain John Carnes. On October 5, however, she was captured off Cape Anne, Massachusetts, and taken into Halifax as a prize. She ended her days as HM sloop *Mohawk*. What set the *Mohawk* apart from most earlier purpose-built privateers was that she was flush-decked, with no raised quarterdeck or forecastle to break the line of her gun deck.

An invitation to all brave Seamen and Marines, who have an inclination to serve their Country and make their Fortune.

The grand Privateer Ship *DEANE*

commanded by ELISHA HINDMAN Esq., and prov'd to be a very capital Sailer, will sail on a Cruise against the enemies of the United States of America, by the 20th instant. The DEANE mounts thirty Carriage Guns, and is excellently well calculated for Attacks, Defence and Pursuit.

This therefore is to invite all those Jolly Fellows who love their Country, and want to make their Fortunes at one Stroke, to repair immediately to the Rendezvous at the head of His Excellency Governor Hancock's Wharf, where they will be received with a hearty Welcome by a Number of Brave Fellows there assembled, and treated with that excellent Liquor call'd Grog, which is allow'd by all true Seamen, to be the Liquor of Life.

The Boston Gazette, 13 November 1780

It was up to the captain to choose his crew. This said, Congress and many states stipulated in their instructions that "One Third, at the least, of your Company, shall be Landmen." Nevertheless, with an outsized crew compared to comparable merchant ships, these men could still be used to wield a boarding pike or cutlass, guard prisoners, assist sailmakers and carpenters, or move cargo from one ship to another. They were also expected to rapidly learn how to serve as part of a gun crew, and to "hand, reef, and steer" – the basics of seamanship. These inexperienced volunteers were mainly youngsters from the country, but clerks, shopkeepers, and even runaway slaves were welcomed in order to fulfill the quota. To compensate for them, the remaining two thirds of the ship's company would be experienced seamen, many of whom were already well known to a local captain. Their ranks also included former fishermen, and even men who had served in British ships.

In 1923, American artist Frank Schoonover used this depiction of privateersmen to illustrate a children's story based on the activity of American privateers of the Revolutionary War. While somewhat inaccurate, it serves to capture the spirit of a boarding action during this period.

The captain would also hand-pick his officers. These would all be experienced sailors, with a reputation, and presumably already known by the captain or the owner. Most privateers had at least two lieutenants on board – one being rated as the First Lieutenant (the captain's second-in-command). Some ships carried a Sailing Master, to deal with the navigation, but in many cases the captain performed this task himself. A few of the larger ships also carried a surgeon to deal with any medical emergencies, with the assistance of a surgeon's mate. Also on the larger ships was a self-appointed marine guard, usually made up of former soldiers, and led by an Officer of Marines. Their job was to act as sharpshooters, and to spearhead any boarding party, but they could also help enforce discipline on board. The ranks of the lesser officers included the prize master, carpenter, gunner, sailmaker, and boatswain, and possibly also an armorer and a sergeant of marines.

On board, the captain would berth in his cabin right aft, while the other officers would berth in

This illustration by Frank Schoonover from 1923 was used to illustrate a children's story, *Privateers of '76*, which sought to glamorize the exploits of American privateersmen during the American War of Independence. The style of dress is wholly fabricated, as privateersmen of the period dressed like contemporary seamen, rather than as pantomime pirates.

the wardroom, or in sleeping cabins opening out onto it. This was usually situated abaft the mainmast, but forward of the captain's cabin. The heads or toilets were in the bow, while the ship's galley was usually located just abaft of the fo'c'sle. The remainder of the crew would sling their hammocks on the berth deck, also just below the open upper deck, and forward of the galley. When the hammocks were stowed away, tables could be slung from the beams, and lockers or benches used for seating. It was here that the majority of the crew ate, slept, and spent their time when not on watch. Beneath the berth deck was the hold, with the ship's stores, the powder magazine, and in some cases the brig, where prisoners could be kept. To a landsman it was a dark, fetid, wet, and often intimidating environment, and due to the large crew it could be crowded, too. However, most privateering cruises were not particularly long, and any privations were offset by the prospect of prize money.

This contemporary depiction of a privateersman is much closer to the mark. He wears a typical seaman's attire of the period – canvas trousers, waistcoat, and jacket, topped with a felt hat. He is also extremely well armed, with small-sword and pistols.

As on all sailing vessels of any size, the crew were divided into watches. Before setting sail the captain and his senior officers would draw up the watch bill, listing everyone on board, and dividing them into two watches (usually deemed larboard and starboard). The crew were divided up according

The prey – a British merchantman, a three-masted ship, from a detail of a contemporary painting by Robert Dodd. Her bluff bow marks her as a barque, and therefore typical of the larger British merchant ships operating in American or Caribbean waters during this period.

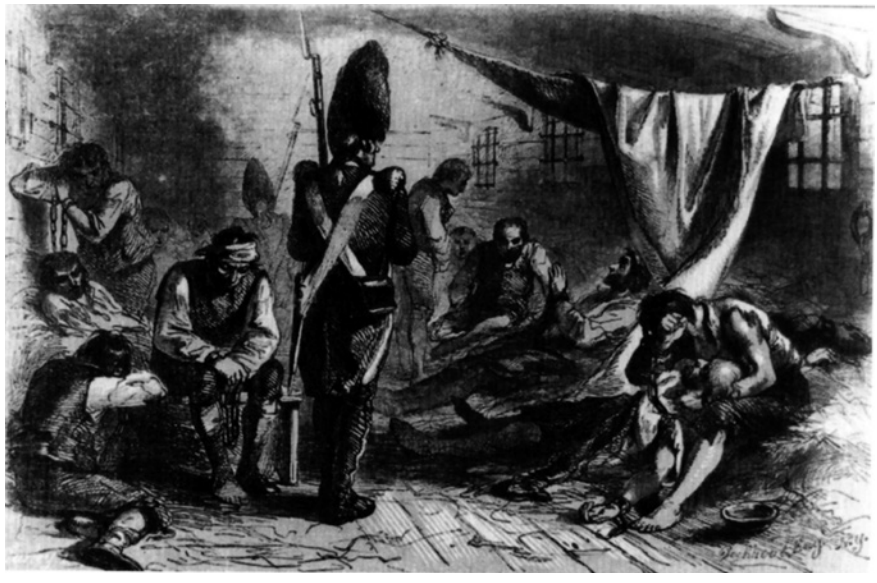
to their skills and experience, while some men were not added to the watch bill, as their duties such as sailmaking, coopering, repairing weapons, serving as stewards to the captain and officers, or cooking meals for the crew were not linked directly to the sailing of the ship. The watch bill usually followed a "one watch on, one watch off" routine, with the two watches taking turns to man the ship. The ship's day was divided into four-hour watches, from noon onwards, with the exception of the "dog watches," between 4 and 8pm.

The dog watches were divided into the first and last dog watches, each of two hours, in order to reach an uneven number of watches, and thus ensure that there was some degree of rotation to the watch cycle. This made certain that, at least every second night, one of the two watches would have a good night's sleep during the "mid-watch," which lasted between midnight and 4am. This said, at certain times – for instance when a privateering vessel was entering or leaving port, or when it prepared for action – both watches would be called on deck, so the vessel would be fully manned. Conversely,

F

THE PRIVATEER *SAUCY JACK* IN ACTION, MAY 1782

The privateering sloop *Jack* of 14 guns and 195 tons was built in Salem, Massachusetts during 1779, and that September she left on her first cruise, under the command of Captain Nathan Brown. She captured eight prizes in her first two cruises, but in August 1780 she was captured by the British in the St. Lawrence River. She became a Canadian patrol vessel, but the following July she was captured off Cape Breton by two French frigates. She was taken into Boston, where she was sold, and duly became the privateer *Saucy Jack*, based in Salem, Massachusetts. In September 1781 she returned to sea, this time commanded by Captain David Ropes. She cruised off Canadian waters until May 29, 1782, when she fell in with HMS *Observer* off Halifax. She was a brig of 16 guns, commanded by Lieutenant John Crymes. The *Saucy Jack* tried to evade the *Observer*, but eventually she was brought to bay, and forced to fight a duel. Ropes was killed in the first broadside, but the battle lasted for two more hours, until the *Saucy Jack* was eventually forced to surrender. The privateer lost seven men killed (including her captain) and 13 wounded, while the account of British casualties varies from three to ten men killed, and several more wounded.



American privateersmen being held prisoner on board the prison ship *Jersey*, moored in Wallabout Bay off Brooklyn. The miserable conditions in which these captured privateersmen were kept earned this ship the description of "Hell Afloat."

in anchor, while the same watch cycle was maintained, the number of men actually standing a watch was reduced to a handful – usually just three or four men. For the times when a privateer went into action, a quarters bill would be used, which specified the place and duty of every man on board. Most would serve the guns, or form boarding parties, while others – usually experienced upper yardsmen – would be on hand to handle the sails, or to form repair parties.

What made all this worthwhile was the prospect of prize money. When joining, each crewman would be required to sign the ship's Articles of Agreement. These outlined the disciplinary structure on board, and the share each crewman would receive of any prize money. It also set down the substantial compensation due to men who were injured in an engagement, hefty bonuses for lookouts who first spotted a sail that turned out to be a prize, and the use of "dead shares," which could be allocated by the Captain to reward other acts which aided the success of the cruise. A typical Article of Agreement of this period laid down the division of shares as follows:

Position	Shares
Captain	8
Lieutenant, Master, Surgeon	4
Officer of Marines, Prize Master, Ship's Carpenter, Boatswain, Gunner, Armourer, Sergeant of Marines, Cook, Master's Mates, Captain's Clerks, Steward, Sailmaker	2
Gunner's Mate, Boatswain's Mate, Carpenter's Mates, Cooper, Surgeon's Mate	1½
Able-bodied Seamen, Gentlemen Volunteers	1
Ship's Boys under 16 years of age	½

While these rewards could be extremely lucrative, and could garner a seaman the equivalent of two years wages in the course of an afternoon, there were risks to the system too. If a cruise was uneventful then nobody would be paid, and the owner and backers would get nothing either. Even more calamitous was the risk of capture. As the British authorities never officially recognized the legal status of letters of marque issued by the American rebels,

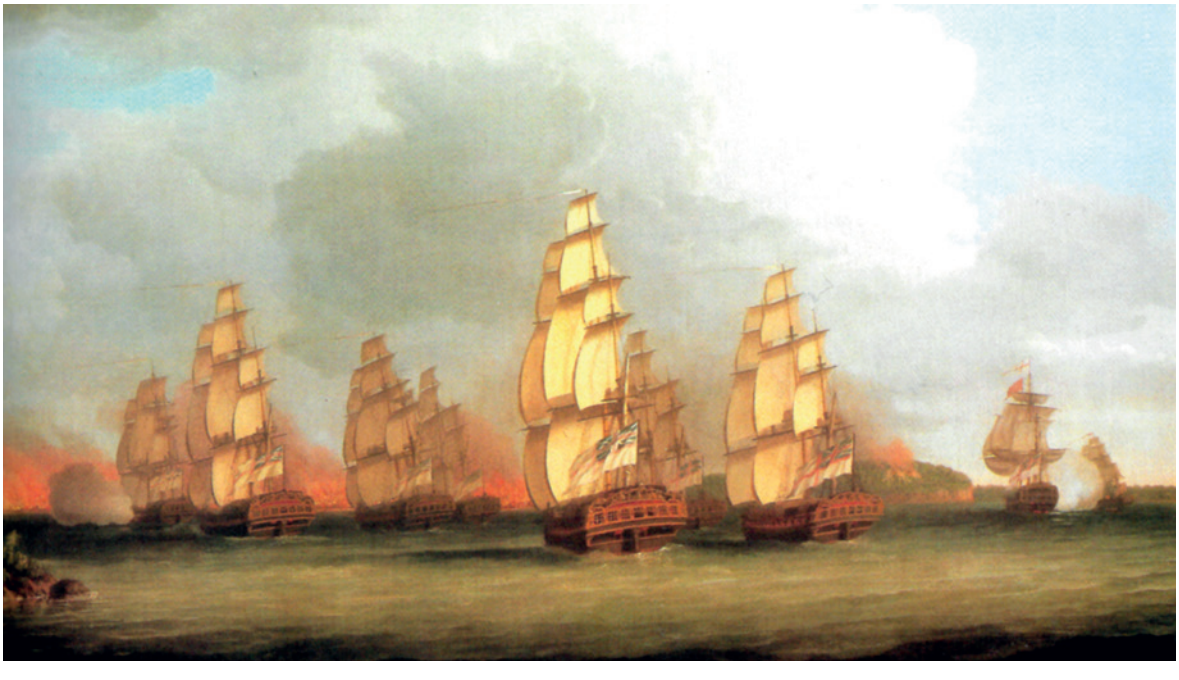
their treatment of privateersmen was not bound by conventional niceties. While they were not tried and hanged as pirates, their treatment fell far short of that meted out to captured European privateersmen. They were usually stripped of their possessions, interrogated for any intelligence they might have, and then locked in the hold.

They would then be transported, either to Britain where they were thrown into a prison – usually Old Mill near Plymouth or Forten near Portsmouth – and left there for the remainder of the war, or, if they were really unlucky, to New York, where they would be put aboard one of the prison hulks moored in Wallabout Bay near Brooklyn. Privateers imprisoned there rightly complained about the appalling conditions they faced – overcrowding, disease, short rations, and a lack of heat were all cited. These miserable conditions reflected the British attitude towards captured privateersmen, whom they saw as little more than pirates, and men deserving little in the way of sympathy. As a result, many seamen died in captivity during the conflict. Loyalist privateers captured by the Americans were also imprisoned, but while conditions were harsh, their treatment was notably better than that facing their rebel counterparts.

PRIVATEERS IN ACTION

The primary reason these American privateers put to sea was to hunt down enemy ships and capture them. While occasionally they were called on to perform services on behalf of the American authorities, such as during the ill-fated Penobscot Expedition of 1779, their real job was to prey on British merchant ships (or American rebel ones if they were Loyalists). By the time the Continental Congress had begun to issue privateering licenses in April 1776, most British shipping had been grouped into convoys, often of a hundred or

In the summer of 1779, an American fleet of Continental and Massachusetts ships, as well as privateers, blockaded and besieged a British force at Bagaduce on Penobscot Bay. Then, in mid-August, a British squadron under Captain Collier arrived, and trapped the American fleet in the Penobscot River. This copy of a painting by Dominic Serres celebrates the pursuit and destruction of the rebel fleet.



This set of presentation silver drinking vessels was presented to Captain Jonathan Haraden of Salem, Massachusetts by the owners and backers of his privateer *General Pickering*, in recognition of his achievements.

more ships, escorted by men-of-war. These were difficult to attack in daylight, so privateering attacks usually took place at night. Thus, during the hours of darkness a convoy would usually group close together, where they could be more easily protected. To counter this, privateersmen would operate in small groups, using some vessels to lure the escorts away from the convoy, leaving the way clear for others to sneak in and engage the merchantmen.

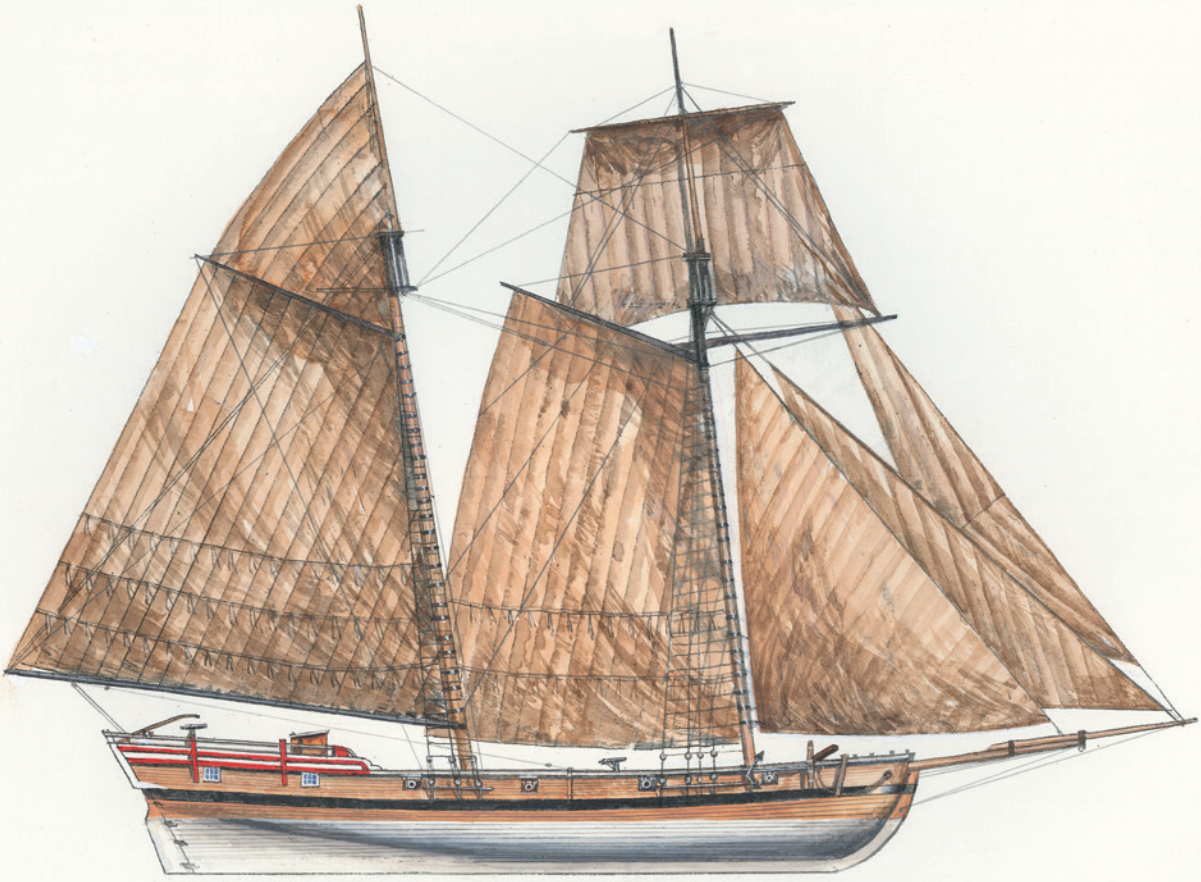
In some cases, particularly fast-sailing and well-armed merchant vessels would sail on their own, relying on their speed and firepower to fend off any privateers. These, though, were eagerly sought-after prizes, and they often carried valuable cargoes, or else troops, powder, or stores destined for British forces in America. So, any privateer that managed to overhaul one of these lone ships could expect a tough fight of it, with the potential prize using her ordnance to keep her assailant at bay. In most cases, privateering

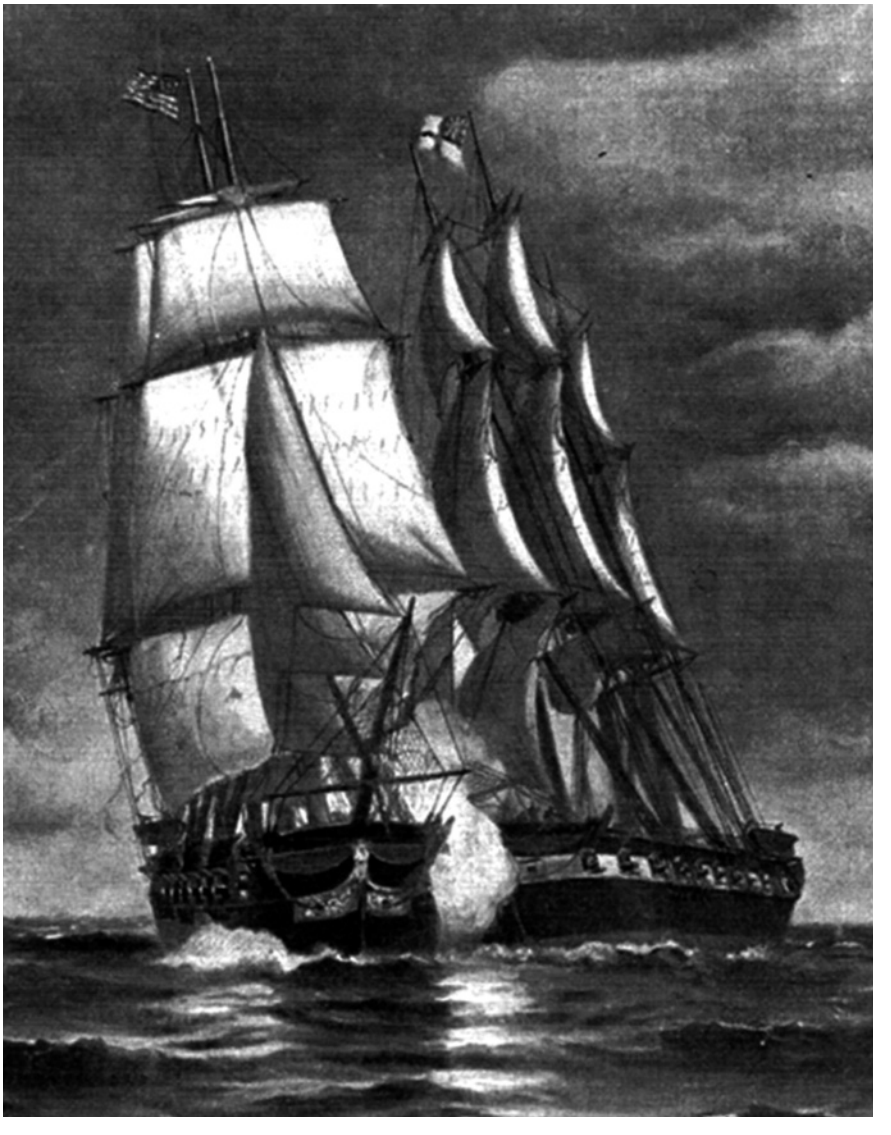
G

THE SCHOONER *BERBICE*, *c*. 1780 AND THE CORVETTE *GENERAL PICKERING*, 1780

The *Berbice* (top) was a schooner, with a fore-and-aft rig on her two masts. Although her origins are unclear, together with her original name, this schooner was almost certainly an American privateer, which was captured by the Loyalists during the summer of 1780, and subsequently bought into British naval service. So, her lines and details were recorded in a British dockyard in the Caribbean, before she became HM Armed Schooner *Berbice*. She was described as a fast sailer of eight guns, and displacing 121 tons. Her speed derived from the shape of her hull at the waterline, which was described as resembling a tadpole. Similar features were found on schooners built in Chesapeake Bay during this period, so this might offer some clue as to her origins. So, she is included here as an example of a class of large schooner much favored by American privateersmen of this region during the conflict.

By contrast the *General Pickering* (bottom) was a large, three-masted ship, a corvette of 16 guns. She was built in Salem, Massachusetts, and in the spring of 1780 she left on her first cruise from the port, under the command of Captain Jonathan Haraden. She was a commodious ship, and so she combined the role of a privateer with that of a merchant vessel. For instance, on her first cruise she was laden with sugar and molasses, which she transported to a Spanish port. The *General Pickering* proved to be a highly successful privateer, and captured upwards of 40 prizes. She also had her share of fights too, engaging the powerful British privateers *Golden Eagle* and *Achilles* in two actions fought off Bilbao in April 1780. The following February, though, the privateer's career came to an end when she was impounded in the Caribbean island of St Eustatius.





A 19th-century depiction of the action of May 8, 1782 between the 16-gun Philadelphia-based privateer *Hyder Ali*, a two-masted sloop, and the three-masted British naval corvette *General Monk* of 16 guns. The American privateer won the fight, and the *Monk* was taken into Philadelphia, where she was refitted as an American privateer.

captains hoped to carry a prize by boarding alone, and merely used their guns to encourage an enemy ship to heave to and haul down her flag. In these cases, however, the privateer's gunner and his gun crews would have to earn their shares the hard way. The exception, though, was if the privateer's crew could somehow bluff their opponents into surrendering. For instance, in April 1780 the small 14-gun Salem privateer *General Pickering* was cruising in the Bay of Biscay when it came upon the 22-gun British brig *Golden Eagle* in the darkness. Hidden by the night, Captain Haraden yelled across that he was an American frigate, and called on his opponent to strike his colours immediately, or he would sink her with a broadside. The British captain complied, and so Haraden captured his prize without a fight.

If it came to a fight a privateer might have to use its guns. Her gun crews would be closed up, with an average of six men allocated to each piece, at least on one side of the ship. The same crew would usually work the gun on the opposite beam if they had to. Typically, a privateer carried

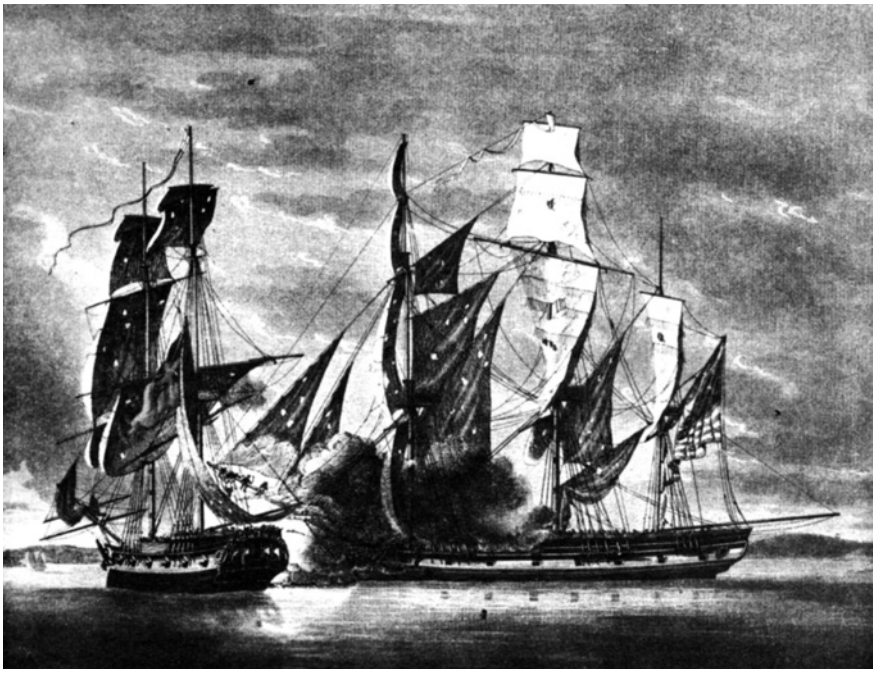
smoothbore guns ranging from 3-pounders of 4½ft and weighing 7cwt (0.35 tons) to 9-pounders, which were 8½ft long, and weighed 23½cwt (1.2 tons).The guns themselves were mainly of British manufacture, usually from Sussex foundries, but some were French pieces. The American gunfounding industry was in its infancy, and even if colonial American guns could be found, they were usually considered crudely cast, and inferior to their European counterparts. In many cases, guns were taken from prizes, along with their carriages and gun tools. Otherwise, most carriages were of American manufacture.

A 6-pounder of the period had a maximum range of 1,600 yards – four-fifths of a sea mile, but in order to penetrate the hull of an enemy it really needed to be fired from close range – within 300 yards. Of course, privateers were reluctant to damage an opponent unless they had to, so if they did engage in gunnery, they tended to aim high, hoping to immobilize their opponent by taking down sails, masts, and rigging. While this ordnance would be powerful enough to overawe unarmed or light-armed merchant ships, it was not really powerful enough to take on an enemy warship – even one of comparable size. Most privateers also carried swivel guns – small anti-personnel weapons, mounted on the privateer's gunwales. These fired bags of musket balls or scrap metal, and while small in caliber, they were effective at clearing an enemy's decks. So too were sharpshooters, whose fire could be used to pick off enemy officers and gun captains, before the American boarding party was sent in to seize the opposing ship.

Although heavily romanticized, this early 20th-century Frank Schoonover painting of American privateers engaging a large British ship – probably an East Indiaman – helped reinforce the idea that these privateersmen helped influence the course of the war.

In a full-on engagement, however, skill at gunnery was the key to success. For instance, in the fight between the two-masted privateering sloop *Hyder Ali* (16 guns, Captain Barney) and the British warship *General Monk* (24 guns, Captain Rogers), fought in April 1782, Barney relied on gunnery to win the day. Having lured the British warship closer – formerly a privateer called the *General Washington* – he turned and unleashed a broadside of grapeshot at point-blank range. Then he laid off the British ship and fired at her rigging, but due to problems with her guns, which had recently been re-bored, the *General Monk*'s fire was much less effective. Barney then brought his ship alongside, and fired into the enemy hull, while his sharpshooters swept the British vessel's upper deck. After almost half an hour of this the British ship struck her colors. This kind of fight was unusual, though. Normally, gunnery was a last resort for a privateering captain and crew.

If the potential target was simply an unarmed or lightly armed merchantman, then the chances of having to fight were fairly slim. Here it was important to see the enemy first. Normally, a masthead lookout could see a sail some 15–20 miles away, and privateering agreements often offered a bonus for men who were first to sight a potential prize. The privateering captain had to identify the other ship and calculate the risk of it being able to resist before ordering his men to give chase. This target would usually flee from the privateer as soon as the American vessel's sails were spotted. So, the privateer was forced to give chase, usually by spreading all their available canvas. This was where speed was of crucial importance. If the privateer was



On May 29, 1782 the 14-gun Boston-based privateer *Saucy Jack* (or just *Jack*), commanded by Captain Ropes, fell in with the HM Brig *Observer* (14 guns) off the coast of Nova Scotia. A running battle ensued, but *Saucy Jack* was eventually forced to strike her colors.

to windward of the prize, and therefore had "the weather gauge," then it would be better placed to dictate the course of the chase.

Usually the likelihood was that the target would be speedily overhauled by the faster privateer. Then it would be called upon to surrender, or risk being fired on. If the enemy was poorly armed, then that usually did the trick. Sometimes, if the privateer herself lacked an impressive armament, her captain might fashion "quaker guns" – fake guns made from wood and paint, which were designed to fool her prey into thinking the privateer was better armed than she actually was. Sometimes this same trick was used by merchant captains, in an attempt to deter privateers from attacking them. So, this made it all the more important that the privateering captain would try to judge the risks involved in every chase, and either keep his distance, or set a course to intercept his prey.

The best circumstances in which to capture an enemy merchant ship were either at night, or in fog or mist, when visibility was restricted. Then the privateer could come alongside without being detected, giving the merchant ship no opportunity to try and flee. Some captains would even rely on deception to capture the enemy, disguising their vessels as unarmed merchantmen, or making them appear slower than they actually were. The idea was to lure the enemy into gun range, before the privateer would show her true colors. The other privateering trick was to operate in concert with other privateers, in a manner similar to German U-boats during World War II. Not only did that widen the potential area of ocean the ships could search, but it allowed them to take on convoys, in the manner described above. For real privateersmen, it was all about evaluating the risks, singling out a likely prize, and then capturing her quickly and with as little loss or damage as possible.

Once a prize was captured, her crew would be imprisoned, and any officers taken on board the privateer. Then a small prize crew would sail her into a friendly port. There are numerous cases where prize ships were recaptured

before they reached a safe haven, so this in itself was a risk. This was partly why privateers carried such large crews. It allowed the privateering captain to detach several prize crews during a cruise, before heading home in the wake of her prizes. Some of the more prominent American privateering captains of the period – men like Jonathan Haraden, Silas Talbot, and John Manley – all excelled at rapidly evaluating the risks involved in every attack, and in the likelihood of their prize, once she was captured, reaching port. They realized that privateering was a risky business, but by using their expertise they could lessen the risk, and so increase the likelihood of making a sizeable profit. After all, that was what the art of privateering was all about.

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INDEX

accommodation 17, 36–37
action **6**, **11**, **13**, (12), **36**, **37**, **39**, (38), 40, **41**, 41–42, **44**, 44–47, **45**, **46**
American Revolution, significance of privateering to 7, 11–12
American Tartar 26
Anti-Traitor 20
Articles of Agreement 40
Atlantic Seaboard, American Colonies **8**

Baltick **12**
Barney, Captain 45
barques **20**, **38**
Belisarius 26–27
Berbice **43**, (42)
Bermudan sloops **9**, (8), 17, **22**
boat, definition of 19–20
bond 31–32, 33
Boston, Massachusetts **7**, 8, **10**
Bridgewater **6**
brig-sloop (*Tyrannicide*) **9**, (8), 32
brigs (brigantines) 16, 19, **21**, (20), 22, 23, 27, **34**, **35**, (34), 38, **39**, (38), **46**
Buffington, Nehemiah 5, 12
business of privateering 27, 30–34

captains 30, 31–33, 34, 36, 40, 47
Carnes, Captain John **30**, 34
Chapelle, Howard I. 27
Comet **15**
Congress 7–8, 10, 31–32, 33
Continental Navy 7, 12
convoys 15, 41–42, 46
courts 33, 34
crew **34**, **36**, 36–38, **37**, 40–41, 46–47
cutters **16**, 19

Deane **36**
decks 23–24, **28–29**
Derby, Elias Hasket **27**, 30, 32
design and development of vessels 14–15
  design and shipbuilding 16–18, **17**, 24–25
  purpose-built privateers 15–16, 23, 24–27, **25**, **28–29**, (28), **35**, (34)
  vessel types 14–17, 18–20, 22–24
Dodd, Robert **38**
dress **37**
Drowne, Solomon 8

Fair American **21**, (20), 27
Falconer's Maritime Dictionary 5, 19–20, **20**, **25**
"frigate-built" 23, 27
frigates 23, 27

galley, definition of 19
"galley-built" 24
General Monk **44**, 45
General Pickering **43**, (42), 44
Golden Eagle 44
Grand Turk **24**, 30, **31**, 32
Gulf Stream **31**
guns 17, 25, 44–45, 46

Hampden **6**
Hannah **6**
Haraden, Captain Jonathan 42, 44
HMS *Observer* **39**, (38), **46**
Hope **9**, (8)
hull forms 23, 25, **25**, 26, **43**, (42)
Hyder Ali **44**, 45

"instructions" 31–33

Jersey **40**

King George **21**, (20), 22

legality of vessel capture 33, 34
"letters of marque" 5, 7–8, 11, 31, 40–41
life on board 34, 36–38, 40–41
longboat, definition of 20
losses 10–12, **11**, 14
Loyalist privateers 5, 19, **21**, (20), 32, 33, 41
Lyon **13**, (12)

magazine explosion **11**
Manley, Captain John **11**
marines 36
merchant ships, British **4**, 11, **11**, **13**, (12), **38**, 41–42
Mohawk **35**, (34)

Nancy 11
navies 4–5, 7, 8, 10–11, 12
New England 8, 10, 16, **31**
New York **32**
newspaper adverts, for volunteers **34**, **36**

oars 19
officers 36–37, 40
owners 30, 31–32, 33–34

Penobscot Bay expedition **32**, **41**
Philadelphia **18**
Phoenix 27
piracy, privateering as 6–7, 10
ports **8**, **10**, 14, 16, 17–18, **18**, **32**

Pratt, Captain Joseph 30, 32
presentation silver drinking vessels **42**
prisoners 33, **40**, 40–41
privateering 5–7
  business of 27, 30–34
  development of American 7–8
  nature of threat to Britain and response by 10–12
  profits from 5, 8, 12, 14, 24, 30
  risks of 14, 15, 24, 30
prizes 14–15, 27, 30, 32–34, 40, 42, 44, 46–47
profits from privateering 5, 8, 12, 14, 24, 30
purpose-built privateers 15–16, 23, 24–27, **25**, **28–29**, (28), **35**, (34)

"quaker guns" 46

Rattlesnake 27, **28–29**, (28)
Rhodes **13**, (12)
rigs and rigging 16, 17, 19, **20**, 22–23, 24, 26, **26**, **28–29**
risks of privateering 14, 15, 24, 30
Royal Navy 10–11

Salem **18**
Saucy Jack **14**, **39**, (38), **46**
schooners **6**, **12**, 15, 16, 19, 22, **23**, 24, **26**, 27, **43**, (42)
Schoonover, Frank **36**, **37**, **45**
Serres, Dominic **41**
ship, definition of 19
shipbuilding **17**, 17–18, 24–25
shipyards **17**, 17–18
slave ships 17, 24–25
sloops **6**, **9**, (8), **14**, 15, **15**, 16, 17, 19, 22, **22**, 27, **39**, (38), **44**, 45, **46**
Smith, Captain Elias 34
snow, definition of 19
Success 27

trading 8
Triton **33**
Tyrannicide **9**, (8), 32

Unity **6**

volunteers, recruiting 34, **34**, 36, **36**

Washington **34**, **35**, (34)
watches 37–38, 40
whaleboat, definition of 20, 22

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